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# Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter

## Starting Magic Lessons with a Few Modest Tricks

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# Prologue

"Allen... I can't believe I'm saying this, but you failed the court sorcerer exam."

"Oh, is that so?"

So that was the reason. I'd been wondering why the professor had called me to his office first thing in the morning.

To be honest, I wasn't sure how to react. I'd personally had a good feeling about the written portion of my exam, and while my answers in the interview hadn't been all that great, they hadn't been terrible either. Even when it came to the magic practical... No, I was pretty sure I hadn't screwed up.

Nevertheless, the result was a failing grade. It came as a harsh reminder that the world can be tough, but there was something *much* more important on my mind:

"Do you have a job for me, Professor? I'm ashamed to admit it, but I haven't got the funds to get back home. And as you know, I don't have anything to do until graduation this coming spring. I'd already booked a seat on a southbound train and everything."

The professor paused before answering. "Again? And you want to go back to your hometown? I'm sure you could find plenty of jobs here in the capital if you set your mind to it."

"That's what I'd thought as well, but it looks like there are more impressive candidates out there."

After the test, I'd gone over my answers with that certain someone I'd nicknamed "the albatross around my neck." They'd all seemed good, enough so that I was sure I'd secured well over a passing grade. My performance in the practical must have been the problem after all—it certainly wasn't my strong suit.

*I guess there really is always someone better than you.*

"It really is a shame," the professor said. "You and Lydia were both excellent students—undoubtedly among the best five I've ever taught. And I've been teaching for a long time."

"Thank you very much. I'm sure she passed, so I hope you'll continue to support her."

"Of course I will. Now, about that job—an old friend of mine just happens to be in the market for someone to tutor his daughter. It's a relatively short gig—only until the spring—but the pay is good. What do you think? Would you give it a try?"

"A private tutor?"

Bitter memories of my long hours spent teaching at the Royal Academy and then the Royal University came flooding back to me. There couldn't be many students as demanding as that particular someone though.

*Yeah, this is going to be fine.*

"I'd be delighted to," I said.

"Oh, you would? Then as they say, the early bird catches the worm. Let's call him at once," the professor replied, reaching for the telephone on his desk.

*Hm? This family has a telephone? Not many ordinary homes have those yet. I've got a bad feeling about this...*

"Actually, Professor, I think I'll—"

"Hello? It's me. Yes, that's what I'm calling about. I can introduce you to one now. Is he good, you ask? I know I've told you about him before; he's one of the best I've seen in my thirty years of teaching! Yes, I see. I understand. Well then, I'll send you the particulars later by familiar."

With that, the professor put down the telephone and then beamed at me. I recognized that look in an instant; whenever he smiles like that, it pretty much always means trouble.

"They'd love to have you. You'll be teaching Duke Howard's daughter, Tina, who hopes to be admitted to the Royal Academy this coming spring. I've met her several times before, and you'll be glad to hear she's the sweetest little darling. Oh, and I won't tell Lydia about this just yet. I assume you'd prefer it that way."

"...You set me up."

"Aha. Whatever do you mean? One of my most outstanding students is all set to hole up in the countryside and take it easy—easy on himself, at least. As his academic advisor, you can hardly expect me to overlook such a waste of potential. Consider it a little tough love from me to you."

"Very funny. I humbly decline," I stated. There was a brief moment of silence before I continued. "I'm not looking to rise through the ranks, you know. It's a miracle that I managed to make it this far. Lydia just dragged me along with her."

"I'm impressed you can admit that so easily. It's one of your virtues, but also one of your flaws. In any case, I'm sure you'll find yourself returning to the capital in no time. I can tell."

*You can make all the confident pronouncements you like, but that's much easier said than done.*

Being a private tutor to the daughter of a duke was going to be a real challenge—at least, that was my initial thought, but then I remembered that Lydia is *also* the daughter of a duke. In other words, things would probably be business as usual for me.

My home kingdom has four dukes, each of whom rules a vast territory in one of the four cardinal directions. We call these noble houses the Four Great Dukedoms.

The dukes had achieved great things back when the kingdom was founded. Because of their history and because the first generation of each ducal house is connected to the royal family by marriage, we address them differently than other countries would. Take Duke Howard, for instance—the head of the Howard family that guards the lands north of the capital. He would customarily be called "His Grace" elsewhere, but we address him as "His Highness." His sons and daughters are styled "Highness" as well.

The original plan had supposedly been to enfeoff the dukes as *royal* dukes, but they had objected that this was "irreverent." The royal family refused to back down, however, so the ducal houses eventually kept "Highness" as a compromise. I'd heard the dukes were secretly still included in the royal line of succession, but who knew whether that was really true. It was all so confusing.

Anyway, I would get nowhere staying in the capital. No matter who my student was, I'd figure something out.

"All right," I conceded. "I accept."

"You do? Get going then. Your destination is the Duchy of Howard. I doubt I need to remind you, but it's a lot colder there at this time of year than you're used to here in the capital. Take care."

"Yes, Professor. Now if you could lend me some money for the train fare..."

"Here's your ticket. The train leaves this afternoon. I booked you a seat in first class," the professor said. He then paused for a beat and added, "I know you earn more than enough to cover your own journey. In addition to your rent, you pay your younger sister's tuition and allowance, and then you send almost everything else home to your family. Isn't Lydia always taking you to task for it?

Enough is enough, I say—start taking care of yourself for a change. Here, I've had this farewell lunch prepared for you. I only order from this restaurant on special occasions; it's a real treat."

I had to stop for a moment to take everything in. "You really did set me up, didn't you?"

The professor chuckled. "I have to send my precious students out into the world sooner or later. I'm especially excited to hear what you'll have to say afterward. Life, Allen, is a series of surprises."

*He really looks like he's enjoying this. Oh well. I need to save some money anyway before I can hole up in—I mean, go home to—the countryside. I'd better spend the next three months putting in some work.*

Despite what the professor had said, I decided to leave a letter for Lydia, who was currently visiting her family. I was scared to think how she might take the news; I needed to leave some evidence that I'd at least made an effort to tell her.

*Lydia will be down south by now. It must be nice and warm there*, I thought. *I wonder what Her Highness—my future student—is like. I hope she's well-behaved. Even if she's a bit of a terror to teach, she can't be as bad as Lydia. I guess that just leaves her personality to worry about.*

Looking back, I wanted to tell my past self to wake the hell up. How could I have been optimistic about a job so proactively arranged for me by *that* professor? Still, this was a lesson that only experience could teach me.

I had one hundred days to get a kid who couldn't even do elementary magic into the Royal Academy and to the top of her class.

# Chapter 1

The scenery that came into view at the other end of the tunnel was... Well, it was white. Everything was snow white.

The stronghold of the Ducal House of Howard is and always has been in the north of the kingdom. I'd heard the whole duchy was buried in snow during the winter months, but even so, I hadn't expected things to be quite so different from the royal capital. The professor had threatened—pardon, *warned*—that it was going to be cold, so I'd come dressed in a winter coat and a scarf the albatross had given me for my birthday last year, yet I had a feeling that wouldn't be nearly enough.

Even with temperature-control spells and the heat-retaining double-pane windows, I could feel the cold seeping in. It was probably only as bearable as it was because the professor had booked me a seat in a first-class railcar. Had I been riding third class as I always did... It didn't bear thinking about. The journey itself was pleasant, but I could tell the road ahead was going to be rough.

As for my farewell lunch, it had been delicious. That was the professor for you—he hadn't been sampling delicacies from restaurants throughout the capital for nothing. So why did I still have misgivings?

The train arrived at the central city of the north—and right on time, according to my pocket watch. I took my luggage and stepped out onto the platform.

*Thank goodness. I don't know what I'd have done had it run late and gotten here after nightfall.*

Sure enough, it was bitterly cold outside, so much so that I was shivering uncontrollably. The only saving grace was that it wasn't currently snowing, and the already fallen snow had been cleared from the platform, which didn't have a roof or any other sort of shelter overhead.

I set off toward the tasteful redbrick station building. According to the professor's note, someone was supposed to meet me there. Lo and behold, no sooner had I stepped inside and started gazing around than someone called out to me.

"Excuse me, sir. Might you be Mr. Allen?"

I turned to see a late-middle-aged gentleman in a butler's uniform. Standing with him was a girl wearing a maid's apron over a pale blue gown. Her hair was adorned with a pure white ribbon, and she looked as though she was trying to hide behind the man's legs.

*Isn't she a bit young for a maid...?* I couldn't help but wonder as I gave my answer. "Yes, my name is Allen."

"I thought so. I am Graham Walker, head butler to Duke Howard. This is...Ellie, a maid in training."

"I-I'm Ellie," the girl stammered out before immediately returning to her hiding spot. Perhaps she was nervous around men. Either way, she was adorable; she had lustrous, shoulder-length hair the color of platinum, tinged with pale blue.

I shot Mr. Walker a questioning look, which he seemed to ignore as he reached for my bag. "Oh, don't bother," I said. "I'll carry it myself."

"I insist, sir. You are to be Lady Tina's tutor, and this is part of my duty as a butler. Now, shall we go? I have a car waiting."

"I-Is that so? Thank you, then."

It sounded as though they had sent a car just for me, which I certainly wasn't going to complain about—I hadn't had many chances to ride in one even in the capital. Although the popularization of magical technology was bringing more and more mechanization to most fields, it still had its detractors, especially among the upper classes. It was for this reason that I was surprised to hear the Howards had adopted them. I could guess they were forward-thinking when it came to technologies.

We made some small talk as we walked to the car, covering all the basic topics—food, the weather, et cetera. Apparently, the conditions we were experiencing now barely qualified as snowfall in these parts. People would really hole up for the winter soon and not come out again until early spring.

*It gets worse? That's a bit depressing. I'm not great with cold weather. I've spent most of my time stuck with a spoiled girl who plays with fire, and... No, that's enough of that. I've got to focus on the conversation.*

"Still, I'm amazed you recognized me," I remarked. "My appearance isn't exactly distinctive, I must say."

"Of course I recognized you, sir. It would have been more difficult not to."

"What do you mean?"

"My master, Duke Walter Howard, and your professor have been firm friends for many years. The professor comes to stay with us several times a year, and for several years now, when in his cups, his talk always turns to—"

"His embarrassing jokes about me? I see."

"Yes, sir. Although naturally, the professor does not joke, but rather *boasts* about you. I knew it was you at a glance."

*How much has the professor been telling them? I hope he hasn't been spinning tales out of everything he can think of, but I wouldn't put it past him. He never compromises when it comes to having a good time... I should write to the albatross about this soon.*

*

The car parked at the station was every bit as luxurious as I'd expected. Mr. Walker stowed my suitcase in the trunk and opened the door for me. There was just one problem.

"Please get in, sir. It's a bit cramped, so would you mind having Ti—*Ellie* sit on your lap?"

"What? Well, no, but...wouldn't *she* mind? I doubt she wants to sit on the lap of a man she just met. I'm sure all three of us could squeeze onto the seat."

"I-I don't mind. P-Please don't worry about me..."

The girl, who hadn't said a word during our walk to the car, raised her head to look at me. When I returned her gaze, however, she quickly looked away.

*Well, she certainly looks like she minds. Was she expecting a four-seater? It must have come as a shock that this vehicle is only designed for two.*

"Ellie has no objections," Mr. Walker said plainly.

"Well..."

I decided to comply and settled into the passenger seat. The young maid followed, managing an "E-Escu—Excuse me" as she reluctantly climbed onto my lap.

When I saw the girl up close, I could tell that she was still but a child. She was probably in her early teens, but she was so light that I worried she wasn’t getting enough to eat. I could also see that the ribbon in her hair was embroidered. The designs were breathtakingly intricate, and the thread was extraordinary—I thought it was probably platinum. Her gown was of a high quality as well, though she didn’t seem used to wearing her maid’s apron. It was a little big on her, for one thing—almost as if she had borrowed it from someone else.

*Could she be…?*

It was only after Mr. Walker closed the car door and we set off that I realized just how freezing it was. The heater was doing its best, but it just couldn’t compete with the cold. I guess there was nothing to be done about that, though—leaving the heater on while they were away from the car was much too dangerous of an option. Automobiles were still a new technological advancement, and there was plenty of room for improvement.

The girl on my lap was shivering. Her gown was too thin, appearing to be her indoor clothes rather than something more appropriate for the weather. It seemed as though she had left the house in a hurry. I took off my scarf and wrapped it around her neck, causing her to look at me in surprise.

*Rest assured, it’s warm and I wash it regularly.*

“Excuse me,” I asked Mr. Walker, who was driving. “Would it be all right if I used a little magic?”

“Magic, sir? I don’t mind, as long as it isn’t anything dangerous. I would ask that you refrain from any fire spells.”

“Of course. Don’t worry—it’s only temperature control.”

“Temperature control, sir?”

“It’s just a little spell—nothing to be alarmed about.”

*Why is he so surprised? Everyone in the professor’s class can cast this spell…although one of us* does *occasionally overdo it and cause an explosion. I wish she’d learn some control. Almost turning the classroom into a scorching hell without warning is a kind of torture.*

*The trick is to adjust three elements—fire, water, and wind—little by little. It’s easy to cause an explosion if you try to raise the temperature all at once, so you have to watch out for that. Conventional methods tend to only use fire, but I think it would take a real master to pull that off well enough. This method at least works for anyone with mana.*

There had been a temperature-control spell on the train car I arrived on, but sure enough, it had been too fixated on a single element. A compound-element spell would have made for a more comfortable trip.

The car’s interior was slowly but steadily warming up.

*Good. This should be more bearable.*

“I suppose this is a perfect example of you ‘exceeding expectations,'" Mr. Walker remarked.

"A-Amazing..." the girl marveled. "You make it look easy."

Despite their compliments, the spell really wasn't much of an achievement; it was just something that nobody else had tried.

Now that I could relax, I had time to watch the scenery out the window. It hadn't yet snowed much this year—at least, not according to what I'd been told. It didn't snow at all where I came from, and the only other places I'd gone between over the past few years were the royal capital and the south, which didn't see much either; so from my perspective, even the snow piled up on the roadsides was shocking. I was a little impressed that the roads themselves were kept so clear. That must have been a result of the Howard family's good governance.

Speaking of the Howard family, there was something that had been bothering me ever since my departure from the capital. "May I ask you a question?" I inquired of Mr. Walker.

"Any question I can answer, sir."

"I can't deny it was a stroke of good luck for me, but why did Duke Howard suddenly decide to hire a private tutor? The Royal Academy entrance exams are this coming spring. Hasn't anyone been teaching Lady Tina before now?"

"Oh? Did the professor not tell you?"

"No, he hasn't told me a thing. He gave me a train ticket, as well as a sheet of notepaper containing the duke's address and a brief notation that someone would meet me at the station. I think he sent a familiar ahead of me, though."

Mr. Walker paused. "I see that the professor and I will need to have a long talk."

"When you do, please allow me—in fact, please allow *all* of his students to join you."

Mr. Walker was apparently a victim too. A comrade!

*Honestly, that professor... I think he's a good person at heart who cares about his students, and when it comes to magic, he's incredible—definitely among the ten best in the whole kingdom...but he almost always under-explains. And half-deliberately too. We must do our duty to contain the damages!*

The girl on my lap had been fidgeting nervously for a short while. "Sorry. Have I made it a little too hot in here?" I asked.

"N-No, not at all," she replied.

*Oh, she looked down again. I guess that shouldn't come as a* *surprise; I'm a man she's never met before, and she's sitting on my lap. It's no wonder she's nervous. I won't tell anyone about this, of course. Adding to the number of ridiculous stories about me won't do me any good.*

In the meantime, the duke's residence had come into view. I had been to Lydia's family home a number of times, and this was every bit as large; but while the Leinster mansion was so gaudy that I could only describe it as "spectacular," the mansion up ahead was devoid of unnecessary decoration. It had a rough, rustic look about it. I had heard that the Howards were a military family who had guarded the north for generations, and the sight of their home was enough to convince me that was true.

A guard opened the front gate upon our arrival and ushered us inside. We were stopped outside the main entrance, at which point Mr. Walker slid naturally from the driver's seat, circled around to my side of the car, and opened the door for me.

*How professional!*

I naturally allowed the girl to climb out first and then followed suit.

"Thank you for traveling all this way, sir."

"No, thank you for having me. And my apologies to you, Your Highness."

"N-Not at all. I should be thanking you for— Huh?"

The girl was midway through a smiling admission when she stiffened before my eyes. *Honestly. How dull-witted would I need to be to have missed that? It was obvious.*

"What? Oh, um, when did you...?" the self-proclaimed "Ellie" asked, evidently flustered.

*She makes such funny faces. Did I pack a video orb?*

"When I met you at the station building."

"Oho," Mr. Walker interjected.

"H-How could you tell?!"

"Your clothing was too luxurious, though the biggest giveaway was that you simply don't look like a maid. Your uniform doesn't fit you, and you aren't wearing a white lace headband. Did you borrow someone else's uniform in a hurry? If so, there are only so many people who would go as far as disguising themselves to get a look at me. And finally, there's the magnificent snow-white ribbon in your hair; I've only seen a few accessories of that quality, even in the royal capital."

"I would expect no less from you, sir."

Her Highness groaned, averted her gaze in apparent embarrassment, and then ran inside, leaving Mr. Walker and me behind. Maybe the shame had become too much for her to bear.

*Oh, my scarf...*

"My apologies, sir. The young mistress insisted on accompanying me."

"No, it's only natural that she would be curious about her new tutor. I do have my reservations about the maid uniform, although it was charming."

"As you say, sir. I ask that you tell her so in person later on; she will surely be delighted. As for now, the master cannot wait to meet you. Right this way." Mr. Walker gestured me toward the massive, solid wooden entrance.

*All right. Time to get to work.*

*

The mansion interior, like the exterior, was more subdued than I had expected. Depending on how charitable one was with their description, it was either practical and sturdy or noticeably plain. Still, the extensive use of wood lent it a certain warmth that was somehow more relaxing than stonework.

There was also a heating system, which I was certainly grateful for. Controlling the temperature in a house this large must have been quite a bother; it looked like they had run pipes through the whole mansion and were using what I could only assume was hot water to heat it. The glass windows also had two—or was it three?!—panes, something that was unseen in buildings in the capital.

*Fascinating.*

"Mr. Allen." Mr. Walker's voice interrupted my survey of the hall. "Please step this way, sir. As for your luggage... Ellie, carry it up to his room."

"Y-Yes, sir!"

A maid who looked just a little older than Her Highness ran up to me. She wore a nervous expression, and her blonde hair was tied into two bunches. So this was the real Ellie.

*Oh, if you rush like that...*

She very nearly fell down right in front of me. I managed to catch her just in time, and she let out a little cry. "Whoa there. Are you all right?" I asked.

"Y-Y-Yes, sir. M-M-My humble apologies."

"Ellie, how many times must I tell you not to run in the house?" Mr. Walker admonished her, exasperated. She was hanging her head and trembling.

*A clumsy maid?*

I helped the real Ellie to her feet before handing her my bag and coat. When I saw her like this, I thought she really did look a little like Her Highness, although I would be hard-pressed to say how. There was just something about her.

"I'm glad you weren't hurt," I said. "Please take care of my luggage."

"Y-Yes, sir! Leave it to me."

"Thank you."

"Ah. Um, excuse me..."

"Oh, pardon me." I had rubbed her head without thinking—a bad habit I have with my little sister and younger schoolmates.

*Oh no. If the albatross finds out, she'll treat me like some kind of deviant again. But then, why is she always asking me to rub* her *head? We've known each other for a long time, but so much about her remains a mystery to me.* I could feel Mr. Walker fixing me with a piercing stare; he had been watching the entire time. *Wh-Why, I wonder...?*

"You truly are just as I've been told, sir."

"I'm extremely curious how the professor has described me...but at the same time, I'm not sure I want to ask."

"He said a great many things, sir...including that you have 'a natural way with younger ladies.'"

"Wh-What a way to put it! I just have a bit of experience dealing with them, that's all."

"Is that so, sir? Now please, this way."

*I can tell he doesn't believe me in the slightest. Damn that professor. The next time I see him, I'm going to make him pay me back for ruining my good name. With interest.*

As we walked, a black wooden door came into view at the end of a long hallway. Mr. Walker knocked, and a beat later, a deep voice from inside instructed us to "come in." The head butler opened the door and gestured for me to enter alone.

*I see. A final interview. Well, it's no use getting cold feet now.*

I nodded and went inside. There, I was met by the sight of a large office desk, and, seated behind it, a large man with hair the same color as Her Highness's. As for other furnishings, a bookcase covered one wall, but it was plainly made.

There was a sudden noise as the door shut behind me.

*Well, there's no escaping now.*

"Excuse me," I said.

"Oh, you're here. I suppose I should say it's nice to meet you, but I can't help feeling that I know you already. It must be because he's told me so much about you. My name's Walter, though I am officially known as Duke Howard."

"My name is Allen. My faith in the professor was never high to begin with, but I must admit, it's sunk even lower over the course of my day."

The duke laughed. "So he roped you in too, did he? He's always been that way. He can't help wanting to boast about anyone he's taken a liking to."

"Is that so?"

"Sorry to call you all the way from the capital. I know you've just been through a lot, but I really am counting on you here. I'm sure you've heard about our situation. When I consulted your professor about it, he gave you a ringing endorsement: 'Allen's the only man for the job; no one else could manage it. Hire him. You must hire him!' We've known each other a long time, but I've never known him to recommend a student so heartily. Naturally, I haven't told my daughter about your circumstances—the court sorcerer issue, that is—only that you're to be her private tutor. Please have no fear on that account."

"I'm grateful for your consideration, but I must apologize—the professor has hardly told me a thing. He said only that I'm to be Her Highness, Lady Tina's private tutor until she is admitted to the Royal Academy. Nothing more."

The duke fell silent for a moment before letting out a deep, deep sigh and resting a hand on his forehead. *I know. Any normal person would have actually explained the job.* He then looked back at me and said:

"The next time he visits, I'll give him a good thrashing."

"Please invite me and his other students. Mr. Walker too. We'll all join in."

"So be it."

"So, I did ask a few questions during the drive here, but what haven't I been told? What happened to my predecessor?"

"I want you to serve as my youngest daughter Tina's private tutor until the coming spring—that much is true—but not exactly 'until she's admitted to the Royal Academy.'"

"Meaning what, Your Highness?"

The duke rose from his chair and looked out the window. He was of the same generation as the professor, meaning he was in his fifties, but it was hard to believe that just by looking at him. His impressive, muscular physique gave him quite a youthful appearance.

"The north has been in my family's care since the kingdom was founded," the duke said. "I am proud of that fact, but as you can see, this is a harsh land for people to live in. It also sits on our borders with other nations and has been the scene of numerous wars. That's why we Howards are seen as a military family."

"Yes, Your Highness."

"My two daughters are my only children. My wife passed away when Tina was still a very young age, you see." There was a pregnant pause before the duke continued. "I don't plan to marry again, and no one else in the Ducal House of Howard has martial talent; as a military family, the line will end with me." Again, there came a pause. "Although my eldest daughter did enroll in the Royal Academy against my wishes, she seems much too gentle to my eyes, and I cannot pretend that she has a particular aptitude for magic. She simply isn't cut out for military life. She tries, but I doubt she'll ever master the supreme spell that has been passed down in our family for generations."

I was beginning to see the bigger picture. In other words, the duke's request was...

"I want you to convince Tina to give up on the Royal Academy for me. I'm sorry to say that my youngest daughter has no talent for magic whatsoever."

*Professor, you've foisted a lot of trouble on me, but this is beyond the pale.*

Convincing Her Highness to give up on the Royal Academy... I could understand doing the opposite—I'd received several requests like that before and experienced no issues helping those students to qualify—but I'd never convinced a person to stop trying entirely. Gaining admittance to the Royal Academy and graduating with suitable grades was a prerequisite for every important office in the kingdom, yet the duke wanted to make someone—his own daughter, no less—forgo those opportunities. There had to be a lot more to this.

"When you say she has no talent for magic," I queried, "what do you mean?"

"I mean just that. At her age, Tina can't even cast the simplest of elementary spells. She has mana—more than my eldest daughter or I do, even—and yet...she can't conjure up a flicker of flame, a drop of water, the gentlest breeze, a crackle of lightning, or the tiniest speck of earth. Even ice magic, which our family has the greatest affinity for, is completely beyond her. I've asked many well-known sorcerers to find the cause, but they all drew blanks."

"I've never heard of a case like this before. Still, while magical aptitude is a prerequisite for the Royal Academy, it has in recent years been admitting students for outstanding talent in other fields. That includes latent ability. Does she really need to give up on enrollment immediately? I'm sure the professor agrees with me. If you don't mind my asking, how is she academically?"

The duke paused. "He told me the same thing when he recommended you. You may think this a father's bias, but my daughter excels academically, enough so that she puts even adults to shame. She's also a kind girl, much like her sister. But the Royal Academy would never be lax enough to admit someone who won't be able to use magic until who knows when, no matter how much mana she has. They've also become especially wary of admitting irregular students since the day you and Lydia enrolled. It seems the headmaster is more welcoming in that regard, but even he can't force everything to go his way."

"I apologize for the inconvenience," I replied, though it took me a moment to respond.

As the foremost school in the kingdom, the Royal Academy attracts students who can be summarized in one word: excellent. They spend their three years intensively studying academic subjects, magic, and swordsmanship, among other things, though the coursework is challenging and intense even for the brightest minds in the kingdom. An approximate fifty percent of students are forced to repeat a year, so graduating after the standard three years is considered an achievement in itself.

It is technically possible to graduate in less than three years, but students who manage to accomplish this are extremely rare. I hear there have only been a handful over the past few decades, all of whom went on to make names for themselves, for better or worse.

A few years ago, there was an uproar at the academy when two students graduated after just a single year. One was even recognized as being among the finest sorceresses in the kingdom despite having barely been able to use magic when she enrolled. Of course, these two students were myself and the albatross, Lydia—the willful eldest daughter of the Ducal House of Leinster. She was the only exceptional one; I had just gotten dragged along for the ride and ended up graduating with her.

*Now that I think about it, I reckon they were just kicking me out to be her "caretaker."*

"I know about Lydia as well," the duke said. "I know she didn't learn a decent command of magic until after she enrolled, and I know that she made it through the entrance exams with her swordsmanship alone. When you consider that, it sounds as though there might be some promise, but..."

"It's the truth, Your Highness. To be precise, she learned to use magic after she met me. Her swordsmanship was always the very best, though."

"But I also hear she was able to cast at least elementary spells. Tina, on the other hand..."

Lydia simply wasn't a detail-oriented person, and in my opinion, her inability to use magic had resulted from an issue with how she had been taught prior to her enrollment. You'd never get anywhere teaching that girl theory—she only learned intuitively.

Even to begin with, Lydia had possessed incredible potential. I'd taught her a few tricks, and a day later—albeit after some...*other* things happened—she was casting advanced spells. Back then, I'd been completely stunned; I seemed to recall our classmates being dumbfounded too. The day after that, she had managed to fire a supreme spell at me.

*While I don't want to say any more about that, I think I at least deserve some credit for having survived it. Then again, she seemed genuinely overjoyed and I was ultimately fine, so things did work out.*

Still, the duke was right: Lydia had at least been able to use a little magic—enough to light a candle—before she enrolled in the academy. Her Highness, Lady Tina, in contrast, couldn't use any magic at all, even though she had the mana for it. That could prove a challenge.

“Tina has a strong sense of responsibility,” the duke said. “She believes that, because she was born into the Howard family, it is only natural that she enrolls in the Royal Academy. Her determination to take on her duty gladdens my heart, but I wouldn’t object to her pursuing a...different path. Even if she can’t use magic, she’s still vital to our family.”

“Vital how, Your Highness?”

“It would be quicker to show you. Follow me.”

With that, the duke rose slowly to his feet and made for the door. I wasted no time in hurrying along after him.

*Now, what does he have to show me?*

*

The duke led me out of the main residence and to a detached building plated with thick glass panes. As we got closer, I broke out into a light sweat.

*Could this be...?*

“Is this a greenhouse?” I asked. “There aren’t any this large even in the capital. And these plants are...”

“You’re well-informed,” the duke replied. “I see he wasn’t lying when he said your encyclopedic knowledge isn’t limited to magic.”

“Her Highness grew these?”

“She did. That girl has been fascinated by horticulture and agronomy since she was little. I was surprised to find her reading my late wife’s books, and the next thing I knew, she’d begun growing plants of her own. Winters here are long and springs short; I built this greenhouse so that she would always have a place to grow things.”

*He built a facility like this for his daughter’s hobby? Great nobles never do things by halves.*

Still, I approved of the project. Her Highness had set her sights on the horticultural and agronomic issues faced in a snowy climate. That was extraordinary for a girl her age.

*Yes, I see now.*

“You want her to continue this research. Is that right?”

The duke took a momentary pause. “You’re as perceptive as he said. You’re right. Thanks to the research she began, my duchy now yields crops that we couldn’t grow here previously. We may even become able to grow flowers and other plants in sufficient quantities to sell to the capital. Both as a duke and a father, I want her to stay here and continue her work."

*Well now, the professor's saddled me with an even trickier problem than I expected. Should I have been more cautious?* I was now caught in the middle of a daughter whose sights were set on the Royal Academy, eager to maintain her family's honor, and a father who wanted her to instead continue her successful research. *And I'm supposed to untangle this mess somehow? Damn that professor. He rushed me on purpose because he knew I'd have refused the moment I found out these details. I'll need to pay him back for this one of these days.*

Albeit with a sigh, I decided to broach one of my main concerns. "May I make a request, Your Highness?"

"By all means."

"I understand your feelings on the matter. Personally, however, I feel that Her Highness ought to choose her own path. If she gains a command of magic that meets the standards necessary to enroll in the Royal Academy and wishes to do so..." I looked the duke straight in the eye. "I would like you to give her your permission."

Once again, the duke took a moment before answering. "I see you don't mince words."

"I was asked to play an unfavorable part from the beginning."

"I understand. If you can teach Tina to use magic to the standards of the Royal Academy, I will do everything in my power to support her. I swear it on my late wife."

"Thank you, Your Highness. In that case..." I was unable to suppress a smile as a lone thought crossed my mind: *This could be fun.*

Lydia had once been convinced that she had no talent for magic, and the most I had done to change that was set her straight and give her just an (arguably) small push. This time, my job was to help a girl unable to use magic for unknown reasons. But if she had mana, there had to be an explanation. She certainly sounded as though she was worth teaching—challenging the unknown is always fun.

"I will find a way," I proclaimed. "I may not look it, but I've been called 'the Brain of the Lady of the Sword.' I'm sure I can do something to help."

*

My interview with the duke came to an end, and it was decided that my tutoring duties would begin the following day. I was grateful to have at least some time to rest—it had been nearly evening when I arrived at the mansion, and I was weary from the journey.

I was guided from the duke's office and soon found myself seated in a massive dining hall.

*Time for dinner!*

"All right. Is everyone here?" Duke Howard asked. "In that case—a toast to our guest from afar!"

"Cheers!" came a chorus of shouts.

The longtime servants of the ducal house wasted no time before digging in. All at once, they reached for the large platters set atop the long table, talking cheerfully all the while. It was an impressive spectacle.

As for the food itself, there wasn't a huge variety. *Bread, soup, salad, and...is this grilled venison and boar?* I decided to reach for some myself. *Good. This venison is plainly seasoned but delicious. The herbs complement it nicely.*

"What do you think?" the duke addressed me cheerfully. "I realize you're used to fine dining in the capital, so it might seem somewhat lacking. We don't have the best of table manners either, do we?"

"Surely you jest, Your Highness. I'm a poor student, so there being meat is enough to bring a tear to my eye; I'll sometimes go an entire week on nothing but bread and soup. I truly mean it when I say the food is delicious. And as for table manners, I'm fed up with all those rules of etiquette, so you needn't worry on my account. Does your whole household always dine together?"

"Is that so? I'm glad to hear it. Yes, this is a northern tradition. We also cook with the same ingredients you'd find in an ordinary household."

"Certainly a nice tradition..." I muttered as I surveyed the hustle and bustle around us. The custom was probably a product of the harsh living conditions in this snowy land, but this was evidence enough that it brought people together and put smiles on their faces. Even Mr. Walker was smiling gently as he took his place beside the duke, a beautiful glass bottle filled with red liquid in his hands.

"Wine, Your Highness?"

"Please. What about you, Allen? You're seventeen; no one would object."

"I would normally love some, but I'll need to go over my preparations for tomorrow when I return to my room. For that reason, I must very, very regretfully decline."

"What a shame," the duke replied. "I'll have a drink, Graham. Have one with me."

"Oh, I couldn't possibly..." Mr. Walker began.

"Where's the harm? Tina and Ellie can look after Allen. Speaking of which, where have those girls gone off to?"

"The young mistress went to dress for dinner a moment ago. I believe they should arrive shortly."

"Oh, I see. In that case, come join me once they're here."

"As you wish, Your Highness."

*I would have liked a drink too... Maybe I should ask for one if I manage to get Her Highness into the Royal Academy. Mmm. This soup is just as nicely seasoned as the venison.*

I was a short while into enjoying my meal when the dining hall doors opened, and all eyes turned to the two girls who had stepped into the hall. The first, who had on a deep-blue dress, had blue-tinged platinum hair that was tied behind her head with an elegant ribbon and decorated at the front with a single hair ornament. The second, wearing the uniform of a maid, had blonde hair that was tied into two bunches. They were Her Highness, Lady Tina and her maid, Ellie.

"Oh, Tina, Ellie. Come here."

"Yes, father."

"Y-Yessir!"

The pair walked over to a spot beside the duke. Her Highness met my gaze, but then she quickly looked away.

*What's this...?*

"Allen, allow me to introduce you—this is my daughter, Tina. She's just turned thirteen. Tina, this is Allen. As I told you, he'll be your private tutor starting tomorrow."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Allen. I'm Tina Howard. I've heard so much about you. I look forward to your lessons, sir."

"And I look forward to teaching you. Ellie, thank you for helping me with my luggage earlier. Weren't you cold in the car?"

"Huh? Wh-What car?" the maid stammered.

"Mr. Allen, would you mind answering some questions for me?"

Her Highness cut in, interrupting her confused maid. Her cheeks were softly flushed, and I couldn't help but grin at her slightly displeased expression.

*I see what the professor meant now—this girl is adorable. She makes such funny faces too, although that might not be a proper thought to have about a girl styled "Her Highness" from one of the best families in the kingdom.*

I chuckled, which only made Her Highness's cheeks redder. *She sure wears her heart on her sleeve,* I thought. *Oh, there's one thing I need to ask her father about...*

"Your Highness," I said.

"Please, don't call me that; it's much too grand for me. 'Walter' is fine."

"Then, Walter, sir...is Her Highness going to be my only—"

"You'll be teaching both Tina and me," the maid interrupted. "I'll be your student too, Mr. Allen."

"—student?"

"You really are perceptive," the duke said plainly. "I was just coming to that, Ellie."

"Y-Yessir!" the maid answered, standing at attention, frozen stiff with nerves. Even Mr. Walker seemed anxious for some reason.

"You see, Allen, Ellie is Graham's granddaughter. That makes her the sole successor to the Walker family, which has stood by the Howards for generations. I'd very much like to place her in your charge as well. Graham has already given his approval."

"Does that mean Miss Walker will also be enrolling in the Royal Academy?" I asked.

"Yes," the duke replied. He then paused for a moment. "I'd be delighted if you could help her to reach that level, but..." The glum looks on his and Mr. Walker's faces, as well as Miss Walker's own dejected expression, suggested that this was going to be an uphill battle. Still, there was something more important on my mind.

"Miss Walker, might I ask you one question?"

"Y-Yessir."

*I assume she can't help it, but I wish she would relax a little. What to do? Hmm... At times like this...*

I smiled at the maid and gave her a pat on the head.

"Huh? E-Excuse me, um..."

Mr. Walker made a noise of subtle disapproval.

"Oh, my deepest apologies. That really has become a bad habit of mine...” I admitted, taking my hand away at once. “As I was saying—what do you want to do?”

“I-I’ll do as I’m told,” the maid stuttered.

“That’s not what I mean. Do you want to go to the Royal Academy with Her High—excuse me, with Lady Tina?”

“O-Of course I do! I adore Lady Tina. Plus, I’m her personal maid.”

“Thank you very much. That sets my mind at ease. Duke Walter, Mr. Walker—I’ve accepted Ellie Walker as my student. Miss Walker, I look forward to teaching you.”

“Good,” the duke said. “She’ll be in your care.”

“Thank you, sir. Please do your best for her,” Mr. Walker added.

“Y-Yessir!” Miss Walker exclaimed. “Um, Mr. Allen...”

“Just ‘Allen’ is fine,” I noted.

“I-In that case, Allen, sir...just call me ‘Ellie’ as well. Please.”

*There’s determination in her eyes. She’s a nice girl too.*

“In that case,” Her Highness interjected after a short pause, “I’ll call you ‘sir’ from now on as well. I trust you have no objections?” She was clearly annoyed; it seemed that I had teased her a little too much.

“Understood. ‘Ellie’ and ‘Tina’ it is, then.”

*Oh dear. It looks like I really do have a rocky road ahead of me...*

*

*“Go to bed early today. You must be tired after your long journey.”*

It was at that welcome command from the duke that I had retreated to the room that had been prepared for me.

*It’s enormous! Wow. It even has a little icebox.*

While lying on the large bed, I ensured that everything was ready for my lesson the next day. I had made all of the necessary preparations while on the train, but it never hurt to double-check.

I had managed to infer some things from the professor’s initial remarks, useless as they were, but it seemed this job was going to be an order of magnitude more challenging than I’d anticipated. Still, it was too soon to give up—meeting Her Highness in person had all but confirmed to me that she had an enormous reserve of mana, and I was certain that I could figure something out if given the opportunity. I was still going to test her for the written exam tomorrow, but if she was doing horticultural and agronomical research at her age, one could assume she would more than meet the requirements.

*I never want to deal with a repeat of what happened with the albatross, so if possible, I'd like to find some other way to help her cast spells.*

As for Miss Walker, I couldn't imagine she would experience any similar problems; it was her personality that would prove an issue, if anything. Mr. Walker and his wife were apparently her only family. There seemed to be more to that story, which I hoped to learn at some point down the line.

*Anyway, I'll do all that I can for them. They're determined and they're trying to improve—there must be a way for them to succeed.*

With that thought, I closed my eyes and gave in to sleep. Not once did the court sorcerer exam appear in my dreams.

*

I returned to my room the next morning after having breakfast. I hadn't seen Her Highness or Miss Walker in the dining room, though I had gone there on the late side; they had likely already finished eating by the time I arrived. I had been told that they would call when they were ready for me, so I made sure my appearance was in order and then waited patiently.

*Maybe I teased them a little too much yesterday...*

As that thought played on my mind, there came a knock at my door. "E-Excuse me," said a nervous voice.

"Come in."

Miss Walker entered the room and gave an energetic bow.

*As I thought—she's truly in her element here. You can tell she's a real maid.*

"I-I've come to fetch you. L-Lady Tina is waiting. P-Please, come this way. I-I'll carry your things."

"Here. Thank you very much."

"N-Not at all! Th-This is my duty as a maid, after all."

*Hm?* I couldn't help but notice that Miss Walker was shooting me furtive glances as she spoke. *Have I done anything to make her this nervous around me? Not that I can remember... Oh well. She'll warm up to me over time, I'm sure.*

I followed her lead through the mansion, and it was then that I noticed we were headed in the direction of the greenhouse the duke had shown me the day before.

"Here we are. Lady Tina is in the room just through here. Um..." Ellie hesitated. "Allen, sir...I need to help my grandfather today. It'll only be this once, but it means I can't participate in your lesson. I'm s-sorry to spring this on you."

"Don't worry about it. I only have a simple test planned for today; I can give you a copy later for you to work through. Thank you for carrying my things."

"E-Eep! Um, I mean..."

"Oh. Again, my apologies."

I had succumbed to my bad habit and rubbed her head. *Now that I think about it, I made the same absentminded mistake yesterday too. I see... So, that's why. I'll need to be more careful.*

After an apologetic bow to Miss Walker, I went through the greenhouse that was home to so many unique species of plant. As I approached the far end, I caught sight of a small cabin.

*The duke had a private room built out here for her? Talk about luxurious. He really is a doting father.*

I knocked on the door and was promptly welcomed inside with a "Come in. It's not locked." The temperature inside the cabin was controlled to be perfectly comfortable, and there was a large window in the ceiling through which I could see the outside glass of the greenhouse.

*How much did it cost to build all this and gather all these plants? I'd better not think about it too much; the answer can't be good for my mental health.*

Her Highness was seated in a chair, busily writing something. I waited for her to notice me before nodding hello, and it was then that she scrambled to her feet. The clothes she wore were neat and mostly white.

"Good morning. I see you're not wearing a maid's uniform today," I remarked.

"Good morning to you too, sir." She paused and then added, "I see you're a little mean."

"You looked charming in it. Oh, but don't forget the headband next time."

"I-I knew it! You *are* mean!"

I had to laugh. "My humble apologies—allow me to try that again. I will serve as your tutor for the next three months. I may not be much help, but I look forward to teaching you."

"And I look forward to your lessons. Th-That said, I need to lay down some ground rules!" Her Highness placed her hands on her hips, stood up straight, and threw out her chest. I was sure she was doing her best to look dignified, but it wasn't enough to overpower the impression she had made the day before—she came across as a little kid trying to act grown-up. "First of all, I forbid you from calling me 'Your Highness' or 'Lady' from now on! As I told you last night, I'm going to be your student. Call me 'Tina' instead, sir."

"Would you settle for 'Ellie'?"

"I would not! Jeez! And don't interrupt me while I'm speaking! Second, I forbid you from lying about anything that concerns me. Even if you have something bad to say, I'm prepared to hear it."

"I understand. I won't hold back."

*This must really be bothering her. I'm sure people have told her all sorts of things in the past, and she seems like a girl who takes things seriously. I should teach her how to relax at some point.*

"Finally, when my lessons are over, um..."

"Yes?"

"If you think that I've done well that day, I want you to praise me."

"Is that all? I can do that."

"Huh?"

"A lot of nobles aren't used to receiving praise—possibly because they're considered too capable to need it—so it works wonders at raising their spirits. That, in turn, improves their grades. I'm in favor of giving my students plenty of praise, even when they don't ask for it."

"I-Is that so?"

"Now, Tina—I think it's time we got started. Oh, but first..."

"R-Right! Um..."

"A handshake. It's a pleasure."

"The pleasure is mine."

I clasped her little hand with a grin. *Thirteen years old, huh? When I was her age, I— No, it doesn't even bear thinking about. That said, I guess it was only four years ago. Looking back, I've come a long way. Or should I say I was dragged a long way?*

Her Highness's voice brought me back to my senses. "S-Sir, would you mind, um...letting go of my hand now?"

"Oh, I'm so sorry."

"Ah, no need to apologize. Actually, why don't you keep—"

"Tina, I'd like to start today's lesson by finding out what you're capable of."

"What I'm capable of…?" she repeated, looking nonplussed.

*Yup. She's adorable all right. I bet she'll be a stunning beauty in a few years.*

"I assume you know that the Royal Academy entrance exam is divided into a written test, an interview, and a magic practical."

"Yes, of course."

"And I'm told you're absolutely hopeless when it comes to the practical."

Her Highness took a moment to answer. "Yes, sir."

"In that case, we ought to spend as much of our three months together as possible focusing on strategies for the practical. But I can't effectively divide up our time unless I know how prepared you are for the written test."

"That's true…but how will you gauge that? The Royal Academy exam is remade from scratch each year; it's famously difficult to prepare for."

"That's a lie."

"Huh?!"

*What a funny face. I'll surreptitiously record it on a video orb. I just hope I brought enough.*

"Test questions follow certain trends, even at the Royal Academy," I explained. "The only reason nobody notices is because they're made for decades—or perhaps even centuries—at a time, rather than just a few years. Honestly, the headmaster is such a nuisance. Does he think everyone lives as long as he does?"

"…So, you're saying that it *is* possible to plan for the written tests?"

"I am. I've even made up some questions, which I'd like you to work through today."

The dumbfounded look on Her Highness's face was priceless. But that night, when I was grading her completed test—which she had received a pat on the head and some praise for giving to me, of course—I found myself speechless. In brief: this young lady was as brilliant as Lydia.

*

Lydia Leinster, the albatross around my neck and the eldest daughter of the ducal house guarding the south of the kingdom, was unmistakably a genius. Most people knew her as “the Lady of the Sword,” but she was far more than just a swordswoman—at seventeen years of age, she had mastered the supreme fire spell “Firebird,” the symbol of the House of Leinster.

When it came to scholarship, Lydia had managed to graduate from the Royal Academy in one year rather than three, and she had done so at the very top of her class. She was now expected to graduate from the Royal University’s four-year program after just three years, again at the top of her class, and she would have graduated even sooner had the university not begged her to prolong her education. There was no doubting that she was a prodigy among prodigies or that she would play an important role in the kingdom’s future.

As well as all these things, Lydia was also a sight to behold; I still remembered being entirely unable to look away one time she had worn a red dress. I rarely admitted this to her, however—too many compliments tended to go to her head.

Of course, all these positive attributes were immediately canceled out by her awful attitude toward me, leaving her with an overall score of zero.

*Has she gotten it into her head that she’s allowed to do absolutely anything she wants to me? I realize that not many people could deal with her whims, but there are still limits to— Ah. I digress.*

From what I could tell, Lydia now had an equal when it came to scholarship; I doubted that even she could have done better on this mock exam I had made. Her Highness had a good chance of getting a record-setting high score—an achievement that was jaw-dropping in itself.

The questions on the Royal Academy entrance exam were drawn from a variety of distinct fields: magic, linguistics, history, economics, political science, ecology, meteorology... It was no wonder then that so many prospective students gave up on trying to plan for them. It might have been possible to prepare for a few years’ worth of exams, but not for centuries’ worth. The truth was, however, that knowledge barely even factored into the results. Having the basics down was of course necessary and worthy of a few points...but that twisted headmaster, who boasted that he had stopped minding his age when he reached three hundred, was interested in but a single question:

*"Why do you wish to enroll in this academy, and what will you show me after you graduate?"*

That was all. He would ask that same question over and over again, and the various fields featured in the test existed only to camouflage it. He was like a devil sneering at the naive kids who foolishly attempted to prepare themselves. It was no wonder that he was on bad terms with the professor—their minds worked in much the same way.

How did I know all this, you ask? Because my answers had gotten a passing grade, even though I had missed answering several knowledge problems. From what I remembered, the headmaster had paid me a visit in person to make sure, serving as my opponent in the magic practical. That brought back memories.

*I wonder why he was a little teary-eyed that time? I don't think I did anything that unusual—I only dismantled an advanced spell.*

Now, Her Highness had written the correct answer to every knowledge problem on my mock exam. How many thirteen-year-olds in the kingdom could read Ancient Elvish, the greatest nuisance in the headmaster's vast arsenal? None who were still studying for their exams—that had been my assumption. But as it turned out, there was one all the way out here.

The essay that Her Highness had written was also nearly perfect; in fact, it was even on par with the graduate theses of university students. I could see why the duke wanted to keep her on hand.

*What to do? My job is to convince her to give up on the Royal Academy, but with these results, I really think she ought to go to the royal capital and experience the world. For now... Yes, I'll think about that once I've seen her magic for myself.*

*

"Here are your tests from yesterday," I said to Her Highness. "Ellie is busy running a small errand for me, so I'll give you yours first."

"Y-Yes, sir!"

*There's really no need to be so nervous.*

Her Highness's cheeks flushed a little as she watched me stick a gold star on her answer sheet before passing it back to her. Her hair bobbed adorably in apparent delight, and I snuck a discreet shot of the sight with an orb.

"As you can see, Tina, I think you are already more than capable of passing the written exam. There is a good chance you might even score high enough to be top of your class. Your essay is especially excellent, even by the standards of the royal capital."

"Oh, um... Th-Thank you, sir."

"With results like these, it should be safe for us to keep written test preparations to the bare minimum. That is why, starting today, I'd like to focus on training for the practical—and on magic, in particular."

"Magic, sir...?" Her happily swaying hair stopped dead, now drooping limply by her ears.

*She really does seem convinced that her situation is hopeless. I'll need to do something about that.*

"Let's start by going over the basics. Tina, what are the fundamental elements of magic?"

"S-Sir, magic is divided into the fundamental elements of water, earth, fire, wind, and lightning. A small minority of people also manifest the special elements, light and darkness. Every person is born with a general affinity for one or more of these seven elements, and these affinities determine their strengths and weaknesses."

"And the Ducal House of Howard?"

"Our family line has an affinity for water and wind. The first Duke Howard, who helped to found the kingdom, excelled in both and was thus able to manifest the element of ice."

"Half correct. Well done."

"Half, sir?"

*As a textbook definition, that would get a perfect score. If you ask me, though, the reality is a little different.*

"I'm going to preface this by saying that these are my own ideas. You won't find them written down anywhere, let alone in a textbook, so please don't mention them to anyone."

"Y-Yes, sir."

"You mentioned the 'fundamental elements,' but what *is* a fundamental element?"

"Huh? Haven't they already been determined through research going back to ancient times?"

"They have indeed. But in that case, what element was the temperature-control spell that I showed you in the car?"

"I assume it was a fire, water, and wind spell."

"According to your current ideas, fire and water are opposites, so that should be an extremely difficult spell to master. In fact, temperature-control spells have only been introduced in things that can carry magical apparatuses of a considerable size—trains and large ships, for instance. Do you not find it strange that I was able to cast one?"

"W-Well, that's because you're amazing, sir!"

"There's nothing amazing about me. If we speak in terms of mana, I'm below average. I have far less mana than you do, Tina. I can't even cast advanced spells."

I could construct the formula for an advanced spell, but I didn't have enough mana to activate it. *How many times has the albatross put me through hell because of that, even though I'm almost a match for her in terms of control...? I think the only reason I technically managed to become the first commoner to ever graduate the Royal Academy second in my class was because of all the crazy things she did.*

"For now, completely disregard the idea that people have 'affinities' for elements. Let us clear our minds and instead think of elements as..." I paused for a moment as I searched for the right words. "I know—think of elements as terms used to make things easier to explain. The aim is to hypothesize, experiment, and then hypothesize and experiment again. Remember the research on plants that you've put so much work into? Magic is just like that. If you discover that ice is your element after all, then all well and good. If you find out that your element is fire, then that's all well and good too."

"B-But that's..."

I could understand why my explanation came as such a shock—it was common knowledge that everyone had an elemental affinity, and it surely wasn't easy to abandon that preconception on command. When someone used magic for the first time, it was only natural for them to assume it was based on magic that someone from their family had manifested in the past.

*Of course, she'll probably have an even harder time accepting what I'm about to tell her.*

"When I was little, I naively wondered, 'Why is it that people can use magic?'"

"Th-That's because people have mana, which we've been striving to master since ancient times."

"Are you sure?"

"I-It's the truth!" Her Highness snapped back, now getting irritated.

*She's like my little sister used to be not long ago. My little sister who's been awfully hard on me lately...*

"This is what I think—magic is just something that people borrow at the cost of mana."

As a child, I was read fairy tales about great people. What had stuck with me most was how easily the people in them were able to wield the incredible magic known as the "great spells."

The Hero's Thunderbolt slew even dragons in one blow.

The Sage's Falling Star destroyed entire countries in a single night.

The Saint's Resurrection brought the dead back to life.

The Knight's Radiant Shield repelled all magic.

I had longed to someday cast great spells such as those, but when I learned to read and excitedly made my way through a spell book, that longing turned to disappointment. In those pages I discovered that, although the study of magic was steadily progressing and the magic-using population was growing by the year, there was no longer anyone capable of casting those great spells. The very existence of some, like the great fire spell Blazing Qilin or the great ice spell Frigid Crane, were already becoming lost to the mists of time. And as far as I had been able to ascertain, while we referred to them all as "great spells" now, there had in ancient times been multiple, more specific groups.

Take Thunderbolt and Blazing Qilin, for instance—these two great spells had apparently belonged to completely separate categories of magic, and not just because they were different elements. The former was purely an offensive spell, while the latter was, as strange as it may sound... Well, most descriptions suggest it was, um, an animal, I suppose. It apparently manifested for a long time after casting.

There had been a limit to what I could find out on my own, so over the past four years, I had asked numerous teachers about great magic. Only a small minority had responded at all, and none of them had known the actual spell formulae. To make matters worse, even the supreme spells designated for each element—recognized as a step below the great spells—had fewer users by the year. At least, that was what I had heard. I hadn't noticed it myself, since I had been spending time with a terror who fired off supreme spells as naturally as she breathed.

*But wait, is that not strange?*

The advent of printing and orb technology had made it easier to record things than ever before, so why were spells that had once been in use continuing to be lost? The secrets passed down in the great houses might have been playing a role—their obsession with oral tradition meant that some spells could disappear with nobody being any the wiser. Still, I couldn't shake this feeling that something was wrong.

It was true that armed conflicts were now much less frequent—the kingdom hadn't seen a major war in over two hundred years—but monsters were still active in a lot of places. Dragons and demons were alive and well too, and there was nothing to suggest they were getting any weaker. A look at various countries' military budgets made this more than clear—far from being cut, they were steadily growing in step with economic development, meaning there was still no shortage of opportunities to hone one's magic in combat.

And yet, the spells that humans could cast were slowly getting weaker.

Her Highness spoke up in protest. "B-But you have to consider the fact that the range of magic users is expanding."

"True, but the power and scale of our magic are also in steady decline. At this rate, we're also likely to see a decrease in users of advanced magic, and then... Actually, it may have already begun. Right now, we're substituting quality with quantity."

Her Highness fell silent.

"Even if you confine your attention to the kingdom, there are few remaining users of Gale Dragon, Blizzard Wolf, Firebird, or Lightning Lord Tiger—the supreme spells that symbolize each of the ducal houses. Their strength seems to be declining as well. Firebird may be at its strongest ever...but we should consider that an outlier."

Her Highness took a moment to respond. "So, what you mean to say is that there are fundamental problems with the way we learn?"

*I knew she was brilliant.*

"Correct. Well done."

"That the countries' frantic pursuits to improve magic since the War of the Dark Lord two hundred years ago were...pointless?"

"I wouldn't call them 'pointless'—the number of potential magic users has increased dramatically. The problem is that they're simultaneously ushering in a decline in quality. Is it not natural to conclude that there must be something more to this?"

Her Highness paused again. "My head is spinning..."

*And no wonder. The albatross is about the only person who believed me when I sprung this on her. She drew her sword at me and shouted, "Why didn't you tell me sooner?!" I remember her threats like they were only yesterday.*

"But..." Her Highness looked me straight in the eye. "If you believe it, sir, then I'll believe you. What should I do? It sounds like it might involve the elementals, whose existence no one has ever confirmed."

This time, it took me a moment to respond. "I can't begin to imagine why you would trust me, considering that we've only just met."

"Huh? I mean...you really are as amazing as the professor and Lady Lydia said, and you're han—n-never mind! Please continue!" Her Highness mumbled something to herself out of seemingly nowhere as her face turned a deep red.

*Have I put my foot in something here? Also, I think I caught some unsettling words just now... N-No, it must have been my imagination. Yes, I'm sure I just imagined it.*

I cleared my throat and attempted to keep up appearances. "I believe that people are able to use magic thanks to the aid of elementals invisible to the eye, and that we provide them with mana as compensation. I suspect that the royal family and the ducal houses may attract elementals of particular affinities."

"But I thought that theory was disproved through experimentation more than a century ago. If elementals existed, it was hypothesized that fire spells would have greater force if cast at a volcano. But from what I read, the force of the spell turned out to be about the same no matter where it was cast."

"That's correct. I see you truly are well read. There were apparently even cases of water spells becoming more powerful at volcanoes." I reached out my right hand to rub her head...and then stopped myself at the very last second.

*That was a close one, but I'm sure I can overcome this habit with a* *little discipline. Hm... I wonder why Her Highness looks a little dissatisfied.*

“By the way, Tina—do you believe there are fire elementals in the ocean?”

“Huh? I-I wouldn’t think so.”

“Why not?”

“W-Well, fire can’t exist underwater, so wouldn’t that also be the case for elementals...?”

“How would you prove that? You can’t even prove that elementals exist.”

“Th-That’s not fair! It’s against the rules!”

I chuckled. “Sorry. You’re such a good student that I ended up wanting to tease you a little.”

Her Highness paused for a moment, tears welling up in her eyes. “See? You *are* mean, sir.” She really was a good student, and I was certainly enjoying our conversation. For better or worse, the only other person I could act like this with was Lydia.

“This is my idea: if elementals do exist, maybe elements don’t mean much to them.”

“You mean they don’t have elemental affinities?”

“I wouldn’t go to that extreme, but I’ve hypothesized that their affinities only equate to slight preferences or dislikes. Or perhaps the vast majority of elementals are like that, and there are other entities that symbolize each element. Now, how are the spell formulae we currently use structured?”

“Fire spells are entirely fire. Water spells are entirely water. Wind spells are entirely wind. They’re designed to forcibly activate a single element.”

“There’s no evidence for what I just told you; trying to prove the existence of invisible elementals through experimentation is ambitious, to say the least. But if you think about it from their point of view, would you be happy to help humans who try to force you into doing the same thing they order time and time again?”

“...I suppose I wouldn’t.”

“Exactly. That’s why I’ve been improving spell formulae to increase the amount of ‘blank space.’”

I had stated this all quite frankly to the headmaster on the day of my graduation, though he hadn’t looked too pleased about it. I suspected that there was an agreement between the elves, giants, and other long-lived races that were outwardly friendly to humanity, probably dating back to after the War of the Dark Lord. I could understand their thinking that they needed to stay ahead of humans in terms of magical technology, if nothing else; they were losing almost all of their real authority to the overwhelming population disparity, so they would naturally be desperate to defend it. Of course, that was none of my business, so I intended to keep my nose out of it.

"We've been talking a long time," I noted. "Let's get to practice."

"Sir..."

*Oh, does she have another question?*

"I've given this a lot of thought, and...I simply can't accept it! Why will you pat Ellie's head and not mine?! I demand an explanation at once! Also, stop addressing me so formally!"

*I'm still a long way from understanding what this girl is thinking...*

*

As sudden as this might be, I would like to take a moment to explain my family. My parents weren't nobles, but ordinary commoners. They were also quite an affectionate couple—so affectionate that even I, their own son, found it embarrassing. It was dyed-in-the-wool affection; they had been friends since they were children, and that friendship had led straight to marriage. Strangely enough, back when I told the albatross this story, she blushed and shouted, *"Why haven't you been with me since birth? Figure out a way to become my childhood friend this instant!"*

*She's impossible. I've known her for four years now, and I still can't believe she says things like that with a straight face. All jokes aside, though—unless I take a stricter hand in her education, I'll pay for it later.*

But enough about her. My parents ran a small magical goods shop in the eastern capital—or the "forest capital," as it's often called—in the heart of the kingdom's eastern lands. Their lives were free of swordplay, offensive spells, and other trappings of violence. They both knew how to cast a few everyday spells, but they would never even dream of attempting advanced magic.

My grandmother, on the other hand, had apparently made something of a name for herself as a spellcaster. She had passed away long before I was born, but my younger sister seemed to have inherited her talent—she was currently attending the Royal Academy and would be turning fifteen this year. I may have been biased, but I thought she was brilliant. She was also a kind girl, and I would venture to say she was a beauty.

My sister's one flaw was that she was still too dependent on me...although she was so charming that I would forgive that for the time being. Besides, life in the dormitories was teaching her to live without our parents looking after her. At the rate she was growing, she would someday be one of the foremost vanguard sorceresses in the kingdom—maybe even clan chieftain. She certainly aspired to success, and I had every faith that she would attain it. I seemed to recall that, as a child, she had been fond of saying that she would become the head of the court sorcerers and provide for me for as long as I lived.

As for me? Oh, I had none of my grandmother's qualities.

I did well enough academically, but as you know, my mana was below average, and my practical abilities...had failed to make me a court sorcerer. My role as chaperone to that audacious genius and albatross around my neck, Lydia Leinster, had been a strong factor in my ability to advance from the Royal Academy to the university; in fact, I was honestly convinced it was ninety-five percent of the reason. After all, she had a tendency to think that if she could do something, anyone else could do it too. How many noble sons and daughters—especially sons—with bright futures supposedly ahead of them had been laid to rest after she had roped them into her antics?! It had to be less than a hundred, I supposed, although I wasn't terribly confident about that. It was still quite a low estimate.

It would have been one thing when she had first enrolled—when she had just been a swordplay maniac. Now that her spells were also among the most powerful in the kingdom, however, there were very few people capable of enduring her unreasonable demands. So, I had been sacrificed—I mean, *chosen* to placate her.

Since our first meeting, there had been times when I could hardly believe she was the daughter of a duke. We now had no reservations with each other; lately, she had even taken to staying over in my lodgings without batting an eye. She would typically punch me the next morning and shout something along the lines of, *"Why didn't you try anything?!"* She truly was a mystery, especially considering that I was certain she would mercilessly try to slice me up and incinerate me if ever I *did* try something. Not that I could, anyway... You didn't hear this from me, but Lydia's mother, the scariest person in the kingdom when she's angry, had given me clear instructions on that point.

That was a long story in itself, but to return to my point—even though Lydia and Her Highness were both the daughters of dukes, they couldn't have been more different. Having grown up a commoner, I naturally didn't know any young noblewomen very well—that is, apart from Lydia. Strictly speaking, I did know one other who called me her "precious friend"...but she was too exceptional to count. Besides, it was doubtful whether I would ever see her again.

Based on my past experiences, Lydia must have been an extreme outlier—and thankfully so. If there were girls like her everywhere, I would flee the kingdom and seek asylum in the republic posthaste. Oh, but maybe the city of water in that mercantile nation was a better option... They certainly had more generous immigration policies.

In short, I simply could not show disrespect to a proper young lady, especially not to the daughter of a duke. Even I had enough discretion for that.

*Does that answer your question, Tina?*

"But sir, I hear that you rub Lady Lydia's head all the time, and for no reason at all. I also hear that you're thick as thieves when you're alone together, that you can quite clearly understand each other without exchanging a word, and that your intimacy makes it awkward to be in a room with you both."

"Y-You have it all wrong! I have no choice in those matters—she'd end up losing her temper otherwise. I do what I must to survive, and that's all there is to it. A-Anyway, who did you even hear that story from?" I considered the possibilities for a moment before asking, "Did the professor tell you?"

Her Highness nodded her assent.

*Damn that rotten old man! How dare he slander me like that. He makes it sound as though Lydia and I are the best of friends! Does he have any idea of the battles we wage in that silence? Why, there was that conversation we had just the other day...*

*"No. I'm not done reading it yet."*

*"You know, I didn't ask you to come over and lean on me."*

*"Okay, I'm done now. Turn the page."*

*"...Fine."*

I could barely hold back my tears.

*Fine. If he wants a war, I'll give him one. I'll spend my time until our next meeting spreading every rumor about him that I can think of. Or maybe I should push him to settle down into family life. I bet foisting a wife on him would be a more effective psychological blow! Heh... I'll make him regret making an enemy of me.*

Oh! I had almost allowed my anger to get the better of me. I needed to do something about the pouting young noblewoman in front of me.

"It's not fair," Her Highness complained. "You promised to praise me, sir, so I insist that you rub my head too! Give me lots of head rubs! Also, I now know that you're nicer than I imagined, so make a habit of being nicer to me too!"

"I see." I paused to digest these demands. "Very well, but on one condition—if you do well on the magic exercise I'm about to assign you, Tina, then I'll rub your head until you want me to stop. I'm not quite sure what you mean by being nicer to you, but...I'll do my best."

"You mean it?!"

"I never lie."

"I've recorded that to an orb. So, what must I do? I feel as though nothing is beyond me right now! I bet I could cast Blizzard Wolf, at the very least!"

*Hm... I should tread carefully; something about this young lady reminds me of Lydia. Still, I'm glad that she's motivated. And any moment now—*

"E-Excuse me."

*Yes, there she is. Perfect timing.*

Miss Walker slowly entered the room carrying a tray. I had asked her to fetch some supplies to use in this exercise, although she needn't have bothered arranging them in such a manner; a simple bag would have sufficed.

*I can guess what's coming next.*

"Allen, sir, I did as you asked and— Eek!"

Miss Walker tripped on nothing at all. I caught her in my arms, at the same time suspending the objects she had been carrying in midair and making them float gently down onto the table.

"Whoa there," I said. "That was a close one."

*One, two, three... Good. Eight candles exactly. Now we can finally* *start practice.*

"A-Allen, sir, um, I mean..."

"Sir, Ellie doesn't like that. Release her at once."

The way the blushing maid was squirming in my arms reminded me of a small animal. Her Highness was watching us with a glacial smile.

*I see.* I gave Miss Walker a tight squeeze. *Wow. She feels amazing in my arms.*

"Huh?" Miss Walker spluttered incoherently. "Um, uh... Well, I mean..."

"Sir! Get away from her this instant!"

Having had my fun, I released the maid. Her eyes were downcast in embarrassment, she was clutching her skirt in both hands, and she looked just a little dissatisfied.

*I knew it—she's charming.*

Her Highness was glaring daggers at me. "I knew it, sir. You are mean. And indecent," she pronounced.

"I suppose the cat's out of the bag now."

Her Highness paused for a moment, then she added: "And amazing. I've never seen anyone cast a levitation spell so effortlessly."

"It's easy."

There came another pause.

"Liar."

*Her eyes didn't miss a thing. I knew this girl was clever.*

I decided to stop joking around and arranged the candles on the table. "Today—actually, over the next three months—I'm going to have you light each of these candles with a different spell."

"Meaning?"

"I want you to use the so-called 'seven elements' and ice—that is, all eight classical elements."

"...I knew you were mean, sir."

"Not in the least. Because..." I beamed at Her Highness as I voiced my honest opinion. "I believe that you can accomplish it without any trouble, Tina."

Her Highness took a moment to think over my words. "If I do accomplish it, I insist that you add a hug to my reward," she said.

"Very well. It would be my pleasure."

*Now, will she succeed in time? We'll never know unless we try, but the odds might be against her. Then again, if she does, I won't be able to* *accede to the duke's request. In fact...*

Before we began, however, there was something I needed to ask. "Just one question—the same question I asked Ellie the day before yesterday: Tina, do you really want to go to the Royal Academy?"

I know that I'm repeating myself, but Her Highness was talented—frighteningly so. Even if she were still unable to cast so much as a single spell come spring, the Royal Academy would probably make an exception to admit her. They would be crazy not to. That said, if she only wanted to attend out of a sense of duty, it was better for me to stop her here and now.

The Royal Academy wasn't the nicest place for those without magical ability—it had been a common occurrence for people to call me a dullard or a lowly wretch, to say that I didn't belong in the academy, or to demand that I "get away from Her Highness, Lady Leinster." Of course, I would have traded places with my persecutors in a heartbeat, but not a single one of them would have been able to handle her. I still remembered the looks on their faces when they had heard that I was going to graduate years early and second in the class—you'd have thought they'd been told that the sky was falling. Fond memories.

Her Highness already had her agronomic research to her credit. If she was trying to get into the academy only as a matter of duty, I thought she was better off gaining more experience in the north than going all the way to the capital...but the determination in her eyes was clear.

"I want to go to the Royal Academy," she declared, "and not out of a sense of duty."

I lined up the eight candles a short distance apart from each other, and with that, the preparations were complete.

"Are you sure, Tina?" I asked. "This greenhouse is enough to tell me how invested you are in your work with plants."

"I love plants and growing crops. I was overjoyed when the new varieties flourished too, but... You won't laugh at me, will you?"

"I won't."

"When I was little, my mother would read me stories about heroes," she admitted to me bashfully. "I admire the great spells they would cast, and...I'd like to master magic like that myself one day."

*I see...* I gave Her Highness a pat on the head. *Now, shall we* *begin?*

"Wh-What was that for?!" she stammered. "What did you mean by that?!"

"I will now explain this exercise. Ellie, make sure you're listening too. I'll return your test later."

"Y-Yessir! I'll do my best."

"S-Sir!" Her Highness exclaimed. "Explain! I demand an explanation!"

"Good. Give it your best shot. You really are a good girl, Ellie."

Instinctively, my hand reached out and rubbed Miss Walker's head. Her Highness watched in silence for a moment before asking: "Why did you immediately rub Ellie's head for that? This is favoritism. I demand reform."

Her Highness seemed quite displeased, while Ellie beside her, flustered as she was, started moving her head so that it was easier for me to rub. *I'll really never get bored of watching these two. I wouldn't have it any other way.*

"Now, here we have eight candles. Please cast a different spell on each one."

"You're ignoring me? Jeez... You mean the seven fundamental elements and ice, like you told us earlier, sir?"

"That's right. Ellie, can you use fire magic?"

"I-I can!"

"Don't be so tense. Try to relax."

"U-Um... Do I just need to light one?"

"That should do to begin with."

Ellie nervously cast a fire spell on the first candle, and a tiny flame sprang to life.

"Good. Well done. Now, would you make a drop of water on the next candle for me?"

"I-I'm sorry, sir! I only know a little fire and wind magic—nothing more..."

"In that case, try to make some wind."

"A-All right, sir."

Miss Walker held out her hand toward the second candle, and its wick swayed slightly. So, she could already use fire and wind... This girl was evidently quite talented as well. Access to basic magic was on the rise, and more and more people were able to cast elementary spells like Miss Walker, but the majority stopped at a single element. That was where the practice of deciding one's strengths and weaknesses based on family history did real harm.

“Good. Thank you,” I said. “I’m impressed that you already know two types of magic, Ellie. You have a promising future ahead of you.”

“Th-Thank you very much. But, um, I’m pretty hopeless, so...”

“Not at all. With your abilities, I’m sure you’ll be ready for the entrance exams this coming spring with time to spare. You should aim to place highly.”

“H-Highly, sir?”

“Now then, Tina. You’re next.”

Her Highness shook her head. “I can’t cast any spells at all.”

“Please try. I can’t teach you otherwise. Besides, didn’t you declare just a moment ago that you feel as though you can do anything?”

There was a brief pause, and then: “Very well.” Her Highness touched one of the candles with an air of grim determination, and a moment later, I sensed the movement of mana. Her spell formula was beautifully constructed as well—true to the fundamentals, reflecting her earnest personality.

And yet...it simply did not activate.

It was mystifying. I couldn’t spot a single mistake in her spell—in fact, I might even call it a textbook example.

Her Highness let her outstretched hand drop limply to her side. She almost looked as though she might cry. After a long silence, she said, “I’m sorry. I knew I couldn’t do it.”

“It’s fine. There’s no need to apologize. I could tell that you have mana; all that remains is to pinpoint the reason it doesn’t activate.”

“...Yes, sir.”

“What’s this? Don’t you trust me, Tina?”

“What?! Well, of course I do, but...” Her downcast eyes looked up at me for a brief moment, but then they diffidently returned to the floor.

*This is quite a serious case. I’m sure her past teachers said a lot of things to her that they shouldn’t have.*

The fact that her spells refused to activate despite her flawless formulation and ample supply of mana might seem inexplicable to an ordinary person, but I was certain she would be able to overcome it. I just needed to discover the cause of her impairment.

“Now, allow me to give you a demonstration,” I said. “Please bear in mind that you'll both be learning to cast this as well."

*How should I do this?* I wondered. Just casting elementary spells would be a trifle dry and, above all, not very enjoyable. *Ah, of course. I know just the thing to add a little flair.*

I gently brought my hands together before the candles and moved just a little bit of mana. And then...

"There. Not half bad."

Both girls looked stunned; it was a little overdramatic, if you asked me. I wouldn't call what I had done "easy," but it certainly wasn't difficult once you got the knack for it. In fact, in the professor's class... Wait, how many of us had been able to do all eight, again? It might not have been very many.

Well, these girls would also soon learn how to make a flower of a different element bloom on each of the eight candles. I could do it, and people used to call me a "dullard."

*

*Dear Lydia,*

*Sorry to write to you out of the blue. I left a letter for you in the royal capital, but I doubt you've gotten back there yet, so I'm sending this one to you as well. They both say the same thing.*

*First of all, knowing your family, I'm sure you've already heard, but...well...I apparently failed the court sorcerer exam.*

*...Don't do anything rash. The examiner gets to decide that part. Understand?*

*At the very least, I did the best that I can right now. And I secured a passing grade on the written test—you saw that when we compared answers.*

*I think I know what you're about to say: "So why did you fail, then?! Don't beat around the bush!"*

*I'm fairly confident in my interview. I didn't say anything to upset the examiner—well, I did, but only a little bit. In other words, I think it was because of the practical—it never has been my forte, after all. I know that I got you to help me a lot with my training, but it turns out that I wasted your time. I feel just awful about that. Sorry.*

*I'm in the north of the kingdom now. I'm sure you'll find out no matter what I tell you, so I'll be honest—I'm staying with the Ducal House of Howard. The professor set me up—I mean, helped me find a job again—and I'm working as a private tutor here to earn my train fare back home.*

*You might be familiar with my students: Her Highness, Lady Tina Howard, the second daughter of the Ducal House of Howard; and Miss Ellie Walker, the Walkers' granddaughter and Her Highness's personal maid. They're charming girls, although I can't yet say anything about their magical aptitude—our lessons only began a few days ago.*

*Well, that's all for today. I'll write again soon.*

*Yours truly,*

*Allen*

*(Once a court sorcerer candidate, now a court sorcerer dropout.)*

*PS: I'm a bit heartbroken at the moment, so I'd appreciate it if you go a little easy on me the next time we meet. I wish you'd stop greeting me with a Firebird out of the blue—it's terrifying.*

# Chapter 2

"A-Allen, sir... I-I'm about to..."

"That's it. Just like that. And relax, please; it'll be over before you know it."

"Y-Yessir!"

Miss Walker cowered and squeezed her eyes shut, although there really wasn't anything to be afraid of; it wasn't as though this little guy was going to hurt her. I supposed that anyone might be frightened the first time. I gently took the maid's slightly trembling right hand and guided her to touch it. She let out a little squeal.

"What do you think?" I asked. "Can you feel it?"

"Uh, um, well..."

"It's all right. I'll hold your hand until you calm down."

"Th-Thank you very much." After a pause, she added, "I-It's...warmer than I expected...and I can feel the flow of mana clearly."

"Good. Well done. You really are a good girl, Ellie. You take instruction so well."

"Huh? Oh, w-well, um... Th-Thank you very much..."

"*Ahem.*"

A reserved cough interrupted us. I glanced over to see a girl in a white dress with an icy smile plastered on her face.

*I see.*

I hugged Miss Walker tight.

"A-Allen, sir?!"

"Sir! Ellie! Separate this instant! You've been all over each other since..." She trailed off and then seemed to start on another thought entirely. "I don't care if this is an experiment in sensing dark magic by touching the professor's familiar! I fail to see how that justifies rubbing her head or clinging to her like that!"

"Well, I'm enjoying myself. Oh, but if you object, Ellie, I'll never do it again. Did you mind?"

"N-Not at all." After a brief pause, she added, "Um, in fact, I'd like more head rubs..."

"Ellie?" Tina asked pointedly.

"O-Oh! I-I'm sorry!"

Miss Walker separated from me with tears in her eyes. Her Highness was glaring daggers at me all the while, but I paid her no mind. It would take more than that to rattle me—not that it was anything to boast about, but I had plenty of experience being picked on by much more frightening people.

Anko, the professor's familiar, which took the form of a black cat, was lounging on the table. It opened its eyes a crack and shot me a dissatisfied look.

*You want more petting? Yes, yes.*

"Anko" was apparently the name of a sweet from a country far to the east. I wondered whether it was also black.

"I hope this experiment allowed you to experience the flow of dark magic." I instructed the two girls while currying favor with Anko. "Let's not waste any time putting that into practice. First, Ellie."

"Yessir!"

Miss Walker stood before a bare candle and held out both her hands with a serious look on her face. Regrettably, nothing happened.

"H-Huh...?"

"Don't worry—if you'd succeeded on the first attempt, there would be no point in my being here. Go touch Anko again and then give it another try."

"A-All right, sir!"

"Tina, it's your turn next. Give it a try."

"Yes, sir."

Her Highness approached the candle with a sad but brave expression. She must have been nervous because she was walking in the most peculiar way, moving her arms and legs in perfect unison. It was a little amusing—even more so when she noticed that I was watching and glared at me.

*She's so sensitive to my gaze.*

After taking several deep breaths, she steeled herself and announced: "I can do this!"

"All right. Go ahead."

Her Highness thrust out both her hands and...couldn't formulate a spell. The formula itself appeared in the air for an instant, and it was simply magnificent—few people were capable of formulating a spell so subtly, even in the professor's class. But it was no use. Her spell formula collapsed and dispersed before it could activate. I could see a faint afterglow of pale-blue mana, but that was all.

She turned to me, on the verge of tears. I couldn't understand why she was so upset—she definitely had mana, and while her spell formulae were by the book, they were excellent overall. She was getting as far as deploying them...but they didn't activate.

*Perhaps I should consider the possibility of an external factor, like a curse or jamming spell.*

I put my right hand on Her Highness's head. "It's all right. As I just said, if you'd succeeded on your first attempt, I'd be out of a job. Let's take our time and carefully test different options. You could sense the flow of Anko's mana too, couldn't you, Tina?"

"I could...although I've never felt dark magic before, so I can't say whether I did it correctly."

"Darkness is a difficult element to handle, as is light. But if you could sense it, then it's possible that you could learn to do it, so don't let it get you down."

"Sir?" Her Highness asked after a pause.

"What is it?"

"Would you give us a demonstration? Preferably something other than the flowers you showed us the other day."

"Hm... All right. I'll give it a try."

I removed my right hand from her head.

*What's that dissatisfied look for? I need a free hand for this, and my left one is busy stroking Anko. Well, I don't exactly "need" a free hand, but it does make things easier.*

I clenched my right hand into a fist and then slowly opened it.

"Wow."

"U-Unbelievable... You make it look so easy..."

"Will this do?" I asked. "No, Anko! Don't try to catch it! Oh, honestly..."

I used my right hand to shelter the magical black kitten I had just created before Anko could get at it. *There, there. That was a close call.* Maybe it stemmed from Anko being the professor's familiar, but it was too curious for comfort. Then again, my students seemed to be just as bad.

"A-Allen, sir! L-Let me hold it too."

"Me first, Ellie."

"No fighting, you two. Here, have one apiece."

I created a second kitten and then gave Her Highness and Miss Walker one each. They made a delightful picture—one that I made sure to record to a video orb.

"It r-really seems like it's alive!" Miss Walker exclaimed.

"It's fluffy..." Her Highness observed. "It feels like petting a real kitten."

"I'm glad they meet with your approval, but please bear in mind—those kittens are only as close to perfect as they are because I have Anko here to serve as an example. I can't always create such detailed creatures."

"Yes, sir," the girls answered in unison. They were such good friends that I could almost mistake them for sisters when they were together like this. It was a calming sight.

There was a chance that magical creatures would appear in the practical portion of the academy entrance exams, so I'd thought it a good idea to get my students accustomed to them while I had the chance. I had even delayed Anko's return to the royal capital—it had arrived here before I had—to enlist the familiar's help, but that evidently wasn't enough. Setting aside Miss Walker, Her Highness was likely going to require quite some time, so I would have to think of other approaches.

"Now, for your next lesson... What are those looks for? ...Very well. You can keep holding those kittens. They won't disappear for about half a day."

*

That night, I visited the Howard family archive. After having done a variety of experiments, I was certain that Miss Walker would be all right. She would probably be ready for the written test as well, considering that she had all the basics down.

When it came to Her Highness, on the other hand...I still didn't have so much as a clue. She was perfectly prepared for the written test, so I could devote almost all of our time to the practical, but we still only had three months. A reasonably bright noble child with their sights set on the Royal Academy would normally take at least a year to prepare. And while she may have had private tutors before me, she had been unable to use magic that entire time.

After more time scrutinizing Her Highness's attempts at spellcasting, I had discovered that something seemed to be preventing her spells from activating. What that something was, however, I had no idea. I had initially suspected a curse, but there was no trace of one. Besides, she was a member of one of the Four Great Dukedoms—it was difficult to imagine that something like that could have gone undetected all this time. Either way, it was safe to conclude that whatever was obstructing her magic wasn't harmful to her personally.

In which case...this wasn't a problem I could solve with my current knowledge. Of course, I wasn't going to throw in the towel over something like that. It was only my *current* knowledge that was lacking—in other words, I just needed to find more. So after dinner, once Her Highness had left the room, I had made a request of the duke.

"You want me to let you into our family archive?"

"Yes. If possible, I would like to investigate old manuscripts—perhaps predating the War of the Dark Lord."

"Meaning that, in your opinion, modern magical science isn't up to the task of explaining why my girl can't cast spells?" the duke asked heavily.

"Regrettably so. This is only a guess, but did Her Highness's previous tutors all give up after the first attempt?"

"...They did."

"I thought so. Did they at least leave you their conclusions in some form?"

"The most I got from any of them was 'This girl can't use magic for unknown reasons; this is a waste of time'!"

"I see."

I needed a moment to digest that. To be frank, I thought it was almost a dereliction of duty; Her Highness's spell formulae were excellent and just shy of activation.

"I believe that Her Highness is capable of learning to use magic," I said clearly, looking Duke Walter in the eyes. "Please allow me to examine the documents in your archive to help her do that. I won't do anything to interrupt her lessons, and I would never dream of removing any of the documents. I simply—"

"Very well—you have my permission. But don't neglect your health; I'm sure it would upset Tina if you overwork yourself," the duke warned. "Graham."

"Yes, Your Highness?" the head butler asked.

"Give Allen the spell-key to the archive."

"As you wish."

After that exchange, I had to be thankful for the duke's magnanimity.

I relied on the moonlight that streamed in through the windows and the lamp in my hand as I searched for the documents I needed. Ancient and rare texts that could qualify as national treasures were casually arranged on the shelves. That was a ducal house for you. I would normally be ecstatic to read them, but I had no time for that at the moment.

I had read most of the contents of the Royal Academy and university libraries, so I immediately excluded any books that I recognized. I was looking for something from over two centuries ago, hopefully related to the study of magic.

All of a sudden, I heard the archive door slowly open.

I instinctively took cover. *Who could it be at this hour?* I wondered, watching as a lamp bobbed toward me. *Hm? This voice and these footsteps belong to...*

"Listen, Lady Tina—we can't stay long. Graham will be upset with me again if we do. I didn't tell anyone I took the key."

"Yes, I know, Shelley. I won't be— Oh, here it is! *The Compendium of Magical Science*!"

It was Her Highness and a woman in late middle age. I believed she was the head maid, although we hadn't yet spoken. Her Highness was happily jumping up and down in her nightgown, clutching a book thick enough that a swift blow with it could probably knock someone over. It was an illustrated encyclopedia that covered almost all existing spells. I couldn't believe that any child would want to read such a thing in this day and age; even at the university, I had been the only one with such interests.

"You really are just like the mistress, my lady—a booklover, a diligent student, and fascinated with magic," the head maid said.

"Really? I'm like mother? I'm glad to hear that. I can't use magic, though..."

"You'll be fine, my lady. My husband tells me that your new tutor is quite an accomplished gentleman! At the very least, he certainly seems nice."

"He's awfully mean! Although I must admit, yes, he is quite nice too..."

"What an odd person he must be. Now, please be on your way, my lady. I'll catch up with you once I've locked up."

"Oh, yes. All right. Thank you."

Her Highness's footsteps gradually faded away, and then I heard the door shut. *Now*—

"I know you're there, sir," a quiet voice stated. "Please show yourself."

*I thought so. She's more than just a head maid.* Her gait was identical to Graham's, so I could tell in an instant—this was a woman who left no openings. She didn't seem to be hostile though, and I wasn't doing anything wrong...so I poked my head out from behind a bookcase.

"I suppose I can't fool you."

"I don't believe you were terribly intent on hiding."

"I surrender," I announced after a pause, raising my hands. It wasn't like she seriously intended to do anything to me, though. "How may I be of service? I take it you want to discuss something with me."

Now that I got a better look at this woman, there really was something about her that reminded me of Graham. Could she be his wife?

"Pardon me, sir, but I've come here because there's a request I simply must make of you. I serve as the head maid of this household. My name is Shelley Walker."

"I'm Allen. You didn't find me here by coincidence, then?"

"No, sir. I intended to sneak in here tonight with or without Lady Tina."

"I see."

"She'll grow suspicious if I'm gone for too long, so I'll be brief—I want you to know how much Lady Tina means to all of us. Once you understand that, I want to ask something of you."

Mrs. Walker's gaze was deadly serious, and that was enough to give me an idea of what she wanted. Yes, this woman loved Her Highness very much.

"Lady Tina is extremely intelligent—her research with crops and other plants has already proved a great boon to the House of Howard," she began. "And yet, she can't use magic. For that reason alone, every tutor she has had over the past few years has taken their leave, rejecting all her other qualities in the process. Each time, Lady Tina wept in secret, and each time, I and every other member of the household were grieved at the sight. It was then that we asked ourselves—does she really need to go to the royal capital at all?"

So, the previous tutors had been "rejecting all her other qualities." Had they even been paying attention? Magical ability or not, Her Highness's talents were a national treasure.

"But Lady Tina still could not bring herself to give up on enrolling in the Royal Academy," Mrs. Walker continued. "Then we learned that you would be coming. Oh, if you could have seen how delighted Lady Tina was! She had recently been forcing herself to act cheerful so that we wouldn't worry, but... Mr. Allen..."

"Yes?"

"Lady Tina considers you and the Lady of the Sword an inspiration—no, the very embodiment of hope." Mrs. Walker looked me in the eye before making her request. "I beg of you—please save Lady Tina. She has no one else she can turn to."

Her words hung in the air for a moment.

"Mrs. Walker," I said. Tears were now streaming down the woman's face—a show of emotion that had quickly renewed my determination. "There's no need to worry. You can rest assured that Tina *will* learn to use magic—that's what I'm here for, after all."

"Do you really mean it, sir?"

"I do. Oh, but I have one request."

"What is it, sir?" She eyed me for a moment and then added, "If you hope to lay a hand on Lady Tina, you'll have to defeat my husband and me first!"

"No, it's about Ellie."

"Ellie? H-Has she been disrespectful?! My h-humble apologies. B-But I assure you, she doesn't mean any harm. Please forgive her, sir. That girl is the only granddaughter Graham and I have. If anything were to happen to her...we could never face our late daughter and her husband."

"That's just it."

"What do you mean, sir?"

I had only known Miss Walker for a few days, but it was clear to me that she had more than her fair share of talent. And yet she was timid and lacked confidence. Some might dismiss that as just her personality, and perhaps it was. After seeing Mrs. Walker's reaction, however, I was certain—these people weren't telling Miss Walker just how much she meant to them!

"Please leave Her Highness to me. I want you and Mr. Walker"—I paused for emphasis—"to tell Ellie how you honestly feel about her."

"I-I should hope that we already do..."

"Not nearly enough! I can teach that girl magic and I can teach her academic subjects, but I cannot give her a family's love. The only people in the whole wide world who can do that are you and your husband. Please, talk the matter over with Mr. Walker as well."

"...Very well. I will discuss this with my husband. Thank you very much, sir."

With that, Mrs. Walker left the archive.

Many difficulties lay ahead, but there was one thing I could say with certainty: this job far exceeded the scope of a private tutor's. *You planned this too, didn't you, Professor? Curse you! I won't forget this—not ever! Not even Anko's charms could cancel this out!*

With my resolve strengthened, I seized hold of several books in the ducal house's moonlit archive.

*

A storm had been brewing since that morning, both indoors and out.

"I can't accept it! I demand an explanation!"

"Is that so?" I answered from my chair.

The girl standing in front of me and shouting with her hands on her hips was Her Highness, Lady Tina Howard, the thirteen-year-old I had been teaching for the past ten days. She was wearing a pale-green dress for a change. Her wardrobe tended toward white, but shades like this also became her.

"Sir! Are you listening to me?!" she shouted. "You were thinking of something else just now, weren't you?!"

"I was thinking only that today's dress suits you."

Her Highness took a moment to process my comment. "H-Hmph. I'm too old to fall for such deliberate flattery. Now, be that as it may—I demand an explanation!"

"I was in earnest. What would you like me to explain?"

"That should be obvious. Is it true that you went for a stroll with Ellie this morning?!"

"I wouldn't necessarily call it a 'stroll.' If you ask me, it was more like harvesting—hunting for snow-covered vegetables was backbreaking work, although it yielded delicious results."

"Then you don't deny that the two of you went to the outdoor vegetable garden alone?" Her Highness pressed. "It's not fair, sir! Why do you always give Ellie special treatment?! I wanted to join you!"

"Oh, but I couldn't possibly..."

"Why not?!"

"You have to ask?"

The reason was because she was the duke's daughter, but she was bound to lose her temper if I told her that. I really was in a bind.

*At times like these, the best thing to ease tensions is—*

The door burst open and a maid in uniform hurried into the room. "I-I'm sorry I'm late!" she panted. "I was helping grandma, and I lost track of the... H-Huh? I-Is something the matter?"

*No, Miss Walker, not you! Well, not that you're not welcome, but I was hoping for that familiar, since it's opted to continue prolonging its stay.*

"Ellie."

"Y-Yes, Lady Tina? Th-That look on your face, um, well...frightens me..."

"Sit right there!"

"Y-Yes'm!"

Her Highness forced Ellie to take a seat before sitting down herself. Her arms and legs were crossed, her cheeks were puffed out, and her eyes were angrily narrowed. I was sure this was her best attempt to appear furious, but for some reason it brought a smile to my face—especially when paired with the flustered Miss Walker.

"I've been meaning to ask you this anyway," Her Highness said. "Ellie, what do you think of our teacher?!"

"Huh? Um, well, I suppose...I-I think he's a wonderful teacher. And very kind..."

"That's true," Her Highness admitted, albeit after a pause, "b-but that's not what I mean! Do you like him? Do you dislike him? If you're not even fond of him and still went out to the vegetable garden in the wee hours of the morning... I-I won't tolerate that sort of behavior!"

"I am fond of him, though."

"...Huh?" Her Highness was positively stunned by Ellie's response.

*Okay, I think I know what this is. I suppose I'll have to step in and — Oh, Anko, wherever have you been? I can't say I approve of your declining to return to the capital simply because of the cold weather. I realize that I detained you initially, but is it not high time you took your leave of us? I see. You want me to pet you? Yes, yes.*

"Y-Y-You are?" Her Highness stammered.

"Yes. He's my next favorite person, after grandpa and grandma!" Miss Walker chirped in response.

There came a long and painful silence before Her Highness turned to me. "Sir."

I chuckled. "You look like Ellie's older sister right now, Tina. I wonder why."

"A-Allen, sir... You must be mistaken," Miss Walker corrected me. "I'm a year older than Lady Tina; that makes me the older sister."

"Well, I can't seem to recall you ever *acting* like an older sister," Her Highness countered.

"Lady Tina! F-Fine. If you're going to speak about me that way, then I won't let you sleep with me anymore, even on nights when it thunders!"

"What?! Th-That's low, Ellie! You're as frightened of thunder as I am!" Her Highness took a moment to collect herself. "Very well. If that's how you're going to be, I have an idea of my own. Sir, listen to this."

"What is it?" I asked.

"It's... I know. It's a story about a certain girl who's one year older than me."

*Hm... I'm fairly certain there's only one person in this mansion who fits that description.*

"There's another girl here one year older than the young mistress?" Miss Walker asked. "I thought I was the only one..."

*You truly haven't caught on? Not that I intend to stop her.*

"That girl is a whole fourteen years old, and yet..."

"And yet?"

"Her room is simply full of dolls!"

"Oh really?"

"She's always, *always* been childish! I try to tell her that she'll never become a fine lady that way, but she won't hear a word of it!

What do you think of that, sir?”

“Hm... I think that Ellie is quite charming.”

“Huh?” Miss Walker seemed rather taken by surprise. “O-Oh, um... Th-Thank you very much, sir.”

“Wh-Why is that your reaction?! Jeez, sir, you really are mean! S-So, if my room were full of dolls, then—”

“Tina, are you feeling quite all right?” I asked, cutting her short. “I think we ought to call off today’s lesson and let you take some rest. I’ll carry you to your bed. What do you say? I think it’s for the best.”

“Meanie! Meanie, meanie, meanie!”

“I’m only joking. I think you’re both quite charming. You really could be sisters,” I opined, basking in happiness as I listened to them banter.

Her Highness had an elder sister who was attending the Royal Academy—or so I’d been told—but these two really were close. I supposed that the bond between master and servant was part of the reason, but it seemed more as though Her Highness, younger but for the most part highly capable, was leading and supporting the older but somewhat clumsy and bashful Miss Walker. I never tired of watching their strange but heartwarming relationship.

*I think that’s about enough idle chitchat.*

“Charming...” Her Highness giggled at my compliment. “You don’t have to stop there, you know.”

“Th-Thank you very much, sir.”

“I’ll consider it,” I said. “Now that Ellie has joined us, I think it’s time we begin today’s—”

A sudden flash shone through the skylight, and a fierce rumble of thunder followed close on its heels.

*I’d thought we might get some rain—after all, it was rather warm out this morning—but nothing like this. I suppose it’s better than snow. Then again, if the cold weather returns tomorrow, a lot of things will end up frozen solid.*

The next thing I knew, I felt something warm on both my arms. I waited a moment and then asked, “What do you two think you’re doing?”

“I-I-It’s not what it looks like. I-I’m not the least bit scared. Honest.”

Her Highness was clinging to my right arm and showed absolutely no intention of relinquishing it, come what may. Miss

Walker, meanwhile, was clutching my left arm more reservedly.

“O-Oh, I need my dollies,” she muttered. “I’m s-scared of thunder...”

On my lap, Anko remained utterly unfazed. *Shouldn’t you really be the most bothered by this? You are shaped like a cat, after all.*

There came another flash of lightning, followed by a peal of thunder.

Both girls whimpered. Her Highness’s grip grew even tighter, and this time Miss Walker squeezed my left arm tight as well. My right arm was in pain, while my left was softly cushioned.

*This is a problem. I can’t teach like this.* I looked at the girls and saw that they were squeezing their eyes shut. *This might not look entirely proper if there were anyone else here to see it.*

I could see clouds flowing past through the skylight, but I doubted the thunder would stop anytime soon. This was a difficulty I hadn't anticipated.

*Maybe I ought to give them the day off. They* have *had lessons for ten days straight.*

We had mostly finished preparations for the written test, and Miss Walker had even succeeded in making a flower of wind. Her Highness, however, still had a long way to go, and there was nothing for it but to keep experimenting with new approaches.

*Right! Now that's settled, I'll just escort them to their rooms and—*

Miss Walker shook her head emphatically and then leaned almost coquettishly against my shoulder. "We'll have our lesson," she announced. "Like this."

"But I really don't think—"

Before I could finish voicing my opposition, Miss Walker interrupted me again. "Lady Tina, please return to your room."

"I-I will not!" Her Highness protested. "Y-You just want an excuse for the two of you to be alone together!"

"I'm not as good a student as you are, my lady; I can't afford to take time off. I want to go to the Royal Academy with you. I don't want us to be split up!"

"Ellie... Sir, I can stay for our lesson as well...as long as we stay like this."

I took a long pause before voicing my decision. "No. It's important to take breaks. You ought to take today off and—"

"Lady Tina! Ellie!"

The ordinarily coolheaded head butler burst into the room. He must have been outdoors—his uniform was sodden and his boots were caked with mud.

*He reminds me of the maid from before, the way he— Whoa there.* I quickly cast a levitation spell on the two girls and one familiar, freeing both of my hands to catch Mr. Walker's knife hand strike. *Oh dear. The look in his eyes is terrifying.*

"I'm not sure I approve of surprise attacks," I remarked after a moment of tense silence.

"Mr. Allen." The head butler paused for emphasis. "I insist that you explain the state of affairs I have just witnessed. Depending on your answer...!"

Sure enough, someone had gotten the wrong idea! Before I had a chance to explain, however, the two girls who had just moments before been clinging to my arms simultaneously cried out.

"G-Graham! Wh-What do you think you're doing?!"

"St-Stop it, grandpa! Mr. Allen hasn't done anything wrong!"

Mr. Walker fell silent.

"It's as they say," I confirmed.

The head butler slowly withdrew his hand and extinguished his animosity. As he did so, he made a deep bow. "M-My sincere apologies. My mind went blank, and... To assault a guest without warning is an unpardonable offense! Please, sir, I ask that you punish me as you see fit."

"Oh no, please don't let it bother you. For better or worse, I'm used to events playing out like this. You must have been out of your mind with worry for the young ladies when it suddenly started thundering. That's why you came straight here from outside without even bothering about your clothes. I suppose it's been your job—or Mrs. Walker's and the others' when you're away—to comfort them at times like this?"

"I am deeply ashamed," Mr. Walker admitted after a pause.

"Did you hear that?" I said to the girls. "The two of you really are loved."

Her Highness and Miss Walker, who had been watching with bated breath as they floated in midair, still looked surprised. Anko had dispelled my spell on its own and landed on the floor.

"It's a shame about today's weather, but this thunder shows no sign of stopping—that's why I was thinking we ought to call off today's lesson. I'll release the spell now."

I gradually lifted my levitation spell and gently deposited both girls on the floor. They were still stiff as boards, though I couldn't even begin to imagine why. I waved a hand in front of their faces.

"Are you all right?"

"Sir."

"Allen, sir..."

Both girls began speaking after a moment and then demanded in unison: "What was that just now?!" They closed the distance between us in a flash.

*Please, leave me some personal space.*

"Explain!" Her Highness ordered. "Why did you go out of your way to block Graham's strike?! If you had the time to cast a levitation spell on us, you ought to have spent it worrying about yourself! And how were you able to block Graham's strike, anyway?!"

"Th-That's right!" Miss Walker agreed. "Grandpa is unbelievably strong! He's a martial arts master! What was your plan if you'd gotten hurt?! That goes for you too, grandpa!"

"Y-Yes, well..." Mr. Walker stammered. "You see, Ellie..."

"No excuses!" both girls shouted in unison.

Mr. Walker was hard-pressed for a reply. Could this be a precious scene? *Anko, where have you gone off to? Oh, you're beside the girls.*

A single meow silenced them both.

"Do you hear that?" I asked them. "Even Anko is telling you to stop. I wasn't hurt at all, so please return to your rooms. There's more thunder on the way, you know."

No sooner had I given the warning than there was a third flash and a loud rumble. Both my arms were seized again, at which point Mr. Walker let out a barely audible groan.

"Young ladies..." I prompted them after a moment.

"We're going to take our lesson like this!"

They were in perfect sync.

*I'm glad that you're such good friends, but try not to take after* her. *Speaking of which...I think my letter should have reached her by now.*

*

*Dear Fugitive,*

*I received your letter with the news, but much too late. You sent it by the national post on purpose, didn't you?*

*There are many things I want to say to you, but let me start with this: why the Howards?! You hate the cold! It's warm at my family home in the south, plus you've been here plenty of times before, so you know your way around. What reason could you have possibly had for going all the way to the north?*

*Most importantly, you could have just tutored my little sister here! Jeez!*

*I've met Tina a few times at dinner parties in the capital. As far as I know, she should be a tough nut to crack, even for you. Of course, there is one thing you could try that I'm sure would work...but I trust you know that's forbidden. Stop using it with anyone other than me. I know* *you can't take responsibility for it. If you end up saying something like, "Mwa hah hah. I've got the life of a thirteen-year-old girl in the palm of my hand," then I'm going to slice you up and incinerate you for real the next time I see you.*

*So, that aside...what happened at the test site? You seemed your usual self after your exam. I honestly can't believe that you failed something as simple as the court sorcerer exam. Are we going to get heavy snow in the south tomorrow? Or maybe a rain of spears?*

*You wrote that your practical was the problem. Is that supposed to be funny? Do you expect me to believe that someone beat you in a confined space like the training ground? Not even the professor with his unhealthy obsession with bothering us or the headmaster of the Royal Academy with his twisted personality could do that.*

*I know you're keeping a big secret from me. I suggest you hurry up and spit it out already if you know what's good for you; I'm going to make you tell me regardless. I can't help wondering—since when have you been in any position to keep secrets from your mistress?*

*Oh well. I understand that you won't be returning to the royal capital for some time. In that case, I'll enjoy my own break here. Let's meet before the Royal Academy entrance exam. If you run, I'll chase you to the ends of the earth, slice you up, and then incinerate you. Plan accordingly.*

*Yours truly,*
*Your mistress and (soon-to-be) pursuer*
*Lydia*

*PS: I won't ask for a letter every day, but be sure to write me every week! And send your letters by griffin mail!*

*

During a break from lessons, I read the letter from the albatross that had arrived that morning and then neatly folded it with a sigh.

*I'm in trouble... She's furious.*

I would need to be prepared for the next time we met or my life would be in jeopardy—after all, she had been almost unrivaled in the kingdom back when all she knew was swordplay, and now she had added magic to her arsenal. She could even rapid-fire the supreme fire spell Firebird without breaking a sweat. What was I to do? I thought I knew why I had failed the exam, but I could never explain it to her.

"Is something the matter, sir? D-Don't tell me..." Her Highness faltered. "Are you returning to the capital?!"

"A-Allen, sir! Y-You, uh, um..." Miss Walker struggled to find her words. "Y-You mustn't!"

Both girls were fixing me with serious stares, worry clear on their faces.

*This won't do; I forgot that I wasn't alone. I can't just sit around sighing or they'll start to worry. This is something I'll need to work on.*

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry." I answered them with a wry smile. "It's all right. Lydia is just upset with me."

"She's upset? Sh-She sent you a letter by griffin just for that?!"

"D-Doesn't griffin mail cost a fortune...?"

"Yes, it does, although the speed is worth the expense. I sent her a letter by the ordinary postal service shortly after I got here, but it could have taken as much as a week to reach the Leinster estate in the south. Judging by this letter, it might actually have taken nearly ten days. I'm sure the bad weather had a hand in that. But someone without much money to spend, such as myself, normally can't afford to send things by griffin or wyvern." I paused for a beat and then added, "Not that I hear of many people using either for a simple letter."

The national postal service was a fixture of everyday life in the kingdom, but it was slow; even express delivery wasn't much faster. As a result, there was cutthroat competition between private delivery services that made speed their selling point. Both griffin and wyvern mail were the crème de la crème, and they didn't come cheap...yet that wealthy young lady used them without turning a hair and wanted me to do the same.

*She always makes such unreasonable demands. Where does she expect me to get the money fro— Hm?*

I checked the envelope marked with the Leinster family crest that the letter had arrived in. Inside was a stack of checks made out for the exact cost of griffin mail to the south; she had even taken the time to make sure that there was one for each week. Resting along with them was a sheet of notepaper, which bore the following words in a hand that I had become all too familiar with over the past four years:

*"Any other objections?"*

*Oh, that's right... She's always been like this...*

My shoulders slumped. I supposed this was her idea of getting back at me. She was fairly careless most of the time, but she never left anything to chance when I was concerned.

"Wow." Her Highness was taken aback for a moment. "I see Lady Lydia hasn't changed. I'm sure that she's unbearably lonely being apart from you, sir. But still, you're *our* teacher right now!"

"Sh-She feels so strongly about you, Allen, sir..."

For some reason, the two girls gave reactions that were entirely different from my own. I didn't think it was anything as sweet as they made it out to be, but...

I stuffed the letter and checks back into the envelope and shifted gears. For the time being, these girls were my priority! I had been tutoring them for over twenty days, and steady progress was being made...mostly by Miss Walker.

As far as preparation for the written test went, Her Highness had always been in good shape. I'd recently gotten Miss Walker to solve the selection of mock exam questions I'd made, so she was bound to secure a passing grade as well. I should have expected as much from the heir to the Walker family, longtime supporters of the House of Howard—she'd had the basics drilled into her, and her education was nothing to scoff at.

I had been reporting both girls' scores on each mock exam to Duke Walter and Mr. Walker, both of whom were delighted with their progress. They must have really loved the girls, but they were unfortunately incapable of showing it. I supposed that was one of the difficulties of being family, though I was in no position to criticize—I still hadn't informed my parents or my younger sister that I had failed the court sorcerer exam. I would need to write to them once I had made clearer plans.

In any case, the written test wouldn't be an issue, and the interview? It would take a serious failure of character to fail that. Even Lydia had passed it, after all. The problem was the practical.

"All right," I said. "Let's resume your lesson."

"Yes, sir!" The two girls answered cheerfully—actually, Her Highness sounded a little hesitant. She still hadn't managed to shake off her doubts about her magical ability, although I was sure that if she could succeed just once, the rest would be easy.

It was then that I remembered a line from Lydia's letter: *"Of course, there is one thing you could try that I'm sure would work."*

Should I try it...? N-No, it was out of the question! It was forbidden, and not just because Lydia had written so. It was a miracle that it had worked for her; she had only learned to use magic thanks to her own astonishing potential. I couldn't attempt to repeat that success. It was simply too dangerous. And I certainly couldn't shape the destiny of a thirteen-year-old girl by—

"Sir? Is something the matter?"

"I-If you're not feeling well, um, I could be your nurse!"

"Ellie," Her Highness began after a pause, "haven't you been awfully quick to get close to our teacher lately? Ever since that business with the thunder."

"N-Not at all! I-If anything, Lady Tina, you've been making sure to take a seat next to him at breakfast, lunch, *and* dinner these past few days—even though there are days I can't join you because of work..."

"E-Ellie!" Her Highness took a moment to compose herself. "Y-You have it all wrong. That's just a coincidence—simple happenstance. I merely felt bad for our teacher because he has nobody to dine with."

"Is that so?" I asked. "And I was so glad to have you sit next to me, Tina..."

"Huh?" Her Highness froze, apparently blindsided by my response.

"No one will sit next to me when Duke Walter is absent except for the two of you... I can't help feeling that everyone is avoiding me. There have even been days when Anko is my only company. But I see how things stand now. I couldn't possibly trouble Your Highness, so there's only one thing for it—Ellie, would you be kind enough to sit next to me from now on, when you're not working?"

"Y-Yessir! It would be my pleasure."

"You're so mean, sir!" Her Highness pouted. "And you too, Ellie!"

I chuckled. "It was only a joke, of course. Now, shall we begin? Try out the spell formulae I gave you yesterday, one by one."

*

"Not this one either."

The old book I had just examined in the dim lamplight wasn't what I was seeking. I was unfortunately already acquainted with spells for curing hangovers. I had lost track of how many times I had needed them since the albatross had developed a taste for wine

—the age of majority in the kingdom being sixteen.

I was in the Howard family archive, where I had been searching for documents like this every night since I had received Duke Walter's permission.

Her Highness had been unable to activate her spells yet again during that day's practice, despite the fact that Miss Walker was continuing to improve with each lesson. Miss Walker had already succeeded in making three flowers bloom—fire, earth, and wind—and while the remaining elements were giving her a bit of trouble, it was only a matter of time. Even darkness, the most difficult element to visualize, should be manageable with Anko's help.

I was glad that Anko continued to prolong its stay—few people in the whole kingdom made use of dark-magic-based familiars. Perhaps the professor had thought that far ahead when he... No, he couldn't have. He called Anko his familiar, but even that was suspect, given how much freedom he was allowing it.

Miss Walker even seemed to have gained confidence in herself, to the point that she had started to become more assertive. I wondered whether Mr. and Mrs. Walker had said something to her; I also found her far more cheerful than she had been when I arrived. I liked her much better smiling than hanging her head.

The problem was Her Highness. She had tried and failed with fire, water, earth, wind, lightning, light, and darkness. I had been able to glimpse her spell formulae deploy for an instant at first, but lately they were vanishing before they even reached that point. It was almost like...rejection. She did marginally better with ice, the specialty of the House of Howard—her formulae would deploy for several seconds but ultimately refused to activate all the same. These attempts left nothing more than infinitesimal slivers of ice in the air, so small that I doubted Her Highness even noticed them. She had never had any success with the existing spells in her textbooks, and she did no better with my spell formulae. Even a spell formula to produce a small flame, into which I had incorporated other elements in as simplified a form as possible, proved impossible for her.

And yet, Miss Walker was improving at a faster rate using my formulae. There was no doubt that *something* was impeding Her Highness's magic. But it wasn't a curse, so what could it be?

We had a little fewer than eighty days before the Royal Academy entrance exam, accounting for travel time and various preparations, and that number was slowly but steadily decreasing. The situation was difficult, but not entirely hopeless—Her Highness was one step shy of activation, at least when it came to ice spells.

*I just need to identify those ice fragments, too small to be seen with the naked eye*, I thought as I locked the archive door with several old books in hand, *then I'm certain I could make a breakthrough. Now to return to my room and read through these. I hope that one of them is what I'm looking for.*

"Allen, sir?"

A familiar voice came from behind me, interrupting my thoughts about my next steps. I turned to see a young blonde maid carrying a lamp.

"Good evening, Miss Walker. Are you making your rounds?"

"Y-Yessir! I just finished them, and I was on my way back to my room when I caught sight of you, sir. What are you doing in— Oh, I almost forgot."

I waited for Miss Walker to continue, wondering what she would say.

"Um, um... I know I really shouldn't, but could I have a moment of your time?"

*

I was certainly glad that Miss Walker had become more assertive. I was also glad to see her more cheerful. That said...

"Thank you for waiting, sir. I've brought hot tea. Is something the matter?"

"Thank you very much, Miss Walker. Please, have a seat here."

"Yes, sir."

The young maid looked puzzled but seated herself regardless. Seeing her like this, I realized that she was every bit as beautiful as Her Highness. And her chest was, well...ample for her age. I doubted that either of them would be lacking for suitors in a few years.

"Miss Walker," I warned the girl sitting in front of me, careful to maintain a serious expression, "you must realize that you are a very charming young woman, and—"

"Please wait."

"What is it? It's important that you hear this."

"Well, this is much, much, *much* more important!" Miss Walker paused before continuing. “Allen, sir...” Her voice was deeper and her gaze more severe than usual. I had never seen her so intense.

“Y-Yes?”

“Why have you been calling me ‘Miss Walker’? You always call me by name, and... Don’t tell me that was only during our lessons? Is that the reason?”

“W-Well...of course not.”

“You’re lying. How dreadful... Is that all I mean to you, Allen, sir? It’s too much.”

“Th-That’s not true.”

“In that case, call me ‘Ellie’ at all times from now on!”

“...Very well. I promise, Ellie.” I raised my hands in a show of capitulation; she was too determined for me to refuse. Maybe the numerous dolls at her bedside gave her courage?

Miss Walker giggled. “Thank you very much. Now what did you want to tell me, Allen, sir?”

“Oh, that’s right. Listen, Ellie. I’ll say this as many times as it takes: you are a very charming young woman. You mustn’t invite men into your room this late at night, even if you have an important private matter to discuss, and even if that man is me. What would you do if something were to happen?! Self-defense is one of the subjects I plan to teach you before your entrance exam...but from now on, please save this sort of thing for someone you’ve set your heart on.”

“In that case,” Ellie replied in an almost inaudible murmur, “it shouldn’t be a problem.”

“I’m sorry, did you say something?”

“N-No. I understand, sir. But, uh, um...may I go to your room on nights when I’m afraid, like when it thunders?”

“W-Well...”

“Please, sir?” She looked as though she might burst into tears at any moment.

“Very well,” I answered after a moment. “You have my permission on nights like that.”

“Yay! Thank you, Allen, sir.”

“Don’t tell Her Highness...although I’m sure she’ll find out before long.”

“Yes, sir!” she bubbled. “Her Highness...?”

Girls could be frightening. Ellie normally behaved like a younger sister to Her Highness—although I recalled hearing that she was a year older—but she seemed disconcertingly grown-up at times like this.

"Now, what did you really want to discuss?" I prompted her as I calmly sipped my tea. "I really can't stay too long. Mr. and Mrs. Walker will be upset with me if they find me here."

"Oh, r-right. Allen, sir—thank you very much." Ellie abruptly stood up and then bowed her head to me. Her expression was serious, but not in the same way it had been earlier.

"Well, that was sudden. What for?" I asked. I honestly hadn't a clue.

"I lied when I said that I was making my rounds," she confessed after a brief silence. "I was waiting for you, sir. Grandma told me where to find you. I think you met her in the archive the other day?"

"I did meet her, although we only stood there chatting for a moment."

"Now you're lying. Grandpa and grandma called me to come see them out of the blue earlier. They both hugged me and told me, 'We love you more than anyone else in the whole wide world, and not just as a memento of our daughter and her husband. We love you as family, pure and simple.'"

"That's wonderful, although I think it was obvious given Mr. Walker's behavior during the thunderstorm the other day."

"But they've never said anything like that to me before. When I pressed them about it, grandma said that you got upset at her—that you told her to make her feelings clear with words and deeds."

"I wasn't upset; I merely suggested that she vocalize her feelings to avoid any confusion."

*I'm glad to hear they took decisive action.*

Ellie was much shier than Her Highness, and she was also more inclined to depend on the kindness of others. I'd had a feeling that this would become a source of much frustration for her had she gone to the Royal Academy as she was. If she were secure in the knowledge that her family loved her, however, I was sure that she would use that support to forge ahead—just as I once had.

I stood up, reached out a hand, and then slowly rubbed Ellie's head. "That really is wonderful."

"Y-Yessir. Would you mind if...I told you a little about myself?"

"Not at all."

"My parents passed away before I was old enough to remember them. My grandparents told me that they were doctors, and that they worked to treat a plague in the royal capital...where they lost their lives.”

So, ten-day fever—a disease that had supposedly claimed many lives after a sudden outbreak in the royal capital a little more than ten years ago. It had never been seen before or since, and it remained incurable. It was widely known as a rare disease, but the cause of the outbreak and the reason it had subsided were both apparently still unknown. It must have been disastrous at the time—supposedly, there had even been rumors that a group dissatisfied with the royal family had been responsible.

“So... So, I really don’t know anything about my parents. I don’t know what their voices sounded like, or what their favorite things were, or how they fell in love, or... I think my grandparents were against their living in the royal capital, so...”

Ellie rubbed her head against my hand for a moment before she continued.

“I was orphaned as a small child and taken in here. My oldest memory is of just how white and cold the snow was. That, and a little girl who did her very best to stick close behind me. She had just lost her mother too, so she must have been anxious. We were birds of a feather.”

Ellie giggled to herself and rested her head on my shoulder.

“I really used to be like a big sister to Lady Tina, you know? Now, it kind of seems, um, well...like she’s the one taking care of me...” Ellie trailed off toward the end of her sentence, and then she added, “Even though I’m older.”

“That’s certainly true.”

“...Allen, sir. Lady Tina is right—you are just a little mean. But...” She relaxed and let herself slump against me. “You’re so very, very, very kind and warm. I’m truly glad I got to meet you. Lately, I’ve been worrying that I might have used up my whole life’s worth of good luck.”

“I’m honored to hear you say that. Nevertheless, Ellie...”

“Yes, sir?”

I bent my knees so that I could match her eye-level and smiled with the heartfelt conviction that she would be fine. “You have all the talent you’ll ever need. If you remember to work hard and keep improving bit by bit, you’ll be able to become whatever you want. You’re not alone—you have people who love you. At the very least, you have to take a little girl by the hand and guide her!"

Ellie giggled. "A little girl, sir?"

"That's right. You're her older sister, after all."

Ellie fell silent for a moment; then she said, "Allen, sir..."

"Yes?"

This time, she gave me a tight hug. I thought it must be the first that I'd received from her. She was trembling slightly.

"I-I was scared. I've always been told that I'm the heir to the Walker family, but I was sure I could never become like grandpa and grandma. Even Lady Tina, who I secretly considered my little sister, blew past me academically in no time at all, so I felt like there was no place left for me." Ellie let her words trail off and then resumed after a pause. "That's why, when I heard that Lady Tina would be getting a new tutor, I mustered up my courage and asked the master to let me take lessons with her."

I needed a second to process that. "Is that how it happened?" I asked.

*That's a surprise. I was sure that Mr. Walker had suggested it himself. Still... I see. This girl summoned the courage to take the stage herself. In that case, I can't let her down.*

"Ellie." I stroked her back as I gently spoke her name.

"Yes?"

"You're amazing. You're a brave girl who forged her own path by her own will. And thanks to your courage, I got to meet you. Thank you. Let's both continue to do our best together."

"Together with you, Allen, sir?"

"Together with me and Her Highness."

Ellie paused for a moment before asking, "Can I make just one request?"

"What would you like?"

"I-If...I manage to get into the Royal Academy with Lady Tina...would you give me a hug too, sh-shir?!"

A moment later, she let out a little exclamation of embarrassment. It sounded like she had stumbled over her words. It also sounded like she wasn't the least bit worried that Her Highness would fail to gain admission. I couldn't suppress a laugh.

*All right. I'd better do my best for her.*

"Uh, um... Is that a 'no'?" Ellie asked me timidly with upturned eyes.

"Very well—I promise. Now, I should be getting back to my room. Upsy-daisy."

"Huh? Oh, uh, I mean, um... A-Allen, sir?"

I scooped Ellie up in my arms, carried her to her bed, and then tucked her in. She immediately burrowed under the covers. Perhaps she was embarrassed about her request? I picked up the old books I had set down on her table.

"Thank you for the tea," I said. "Let's keep up the hard work in tomorrow's lesson."

Before I closed the door, I heard a soft but clear voice say: "Y-Yessir. G-Goodnight..."

*Goodnight, Ellie. And now...*

A pair of dark figures met me outside the door.

"Mr. and Mrs. Walker."

"Mr. Allen," they answered in unison, "if you want to lay your hands on Ellie, you'll have to defeat us first!"

Their love was a little overbearing.

*But as you can see, one of my hands is occupied with books, and— What? You're still going to do this? I see. Very well. Good grief...*

As it turned out, they were both masters of close-quarters combat at a level that was rare even in the capital.

*

"Allen, sir. Good mor— Wh-What happened to you?! You've hurt your face! Th-This is awful. Um, um, where was that salve...?"

"Huh? Oh, I'm fine. It's just a scratch; not even worth casting a healing spell on."

"O-Out of the question! Please stay right there, sir. I'll fetch some salve for you."

No sooner had Ellie run up to me than she dashed out of the room again.

*What could have gotten into her, Your Highness?*

"Sir," Her Highness asked after a pause, "did something happen between you and Ellie?"

"No, nothing in particular."

There was another pause.

"Are you sure?"

"I have no reason to lie."

After all, the only thing we'd done the previous night was have a little chat. I supposed we might have become slightly better friends too. Even so, I could feel a pair of reproachful eyes focused on me as I closed the book that I'd been reading.

*Not this one either, huh?*

"Allen, sir! I've brought the— Eek!"

*Ah. Déjà vu.* I rose from my chair and caught Ellie. "Are you all right? I think you ought to take things a little more slowly."

"Th-Thank you very much... But, um, you'll catch me like this whenever you're around, won't you?"

"Well, I suppose so, but..."

"Then, in that case—"

"Sir. Ellie..."

*Whoops. This won't do. Now, Ellie, let go and— Why are you clinging to me instead?*

"Ellie?" Her Highness interjected. "Our teacher doesn't like that. Release him at once!"

"Do you mind, Allen, sir?"

"Not in the least."

"You heard him, Lady Tina. That means I can get all the hugs I want."

"S-Sir," Her Highness protested after an indignant pause.

*Oh, jeez. It looks like this is going to be another hectic— Ellie?*

"Um..." Ellie whispered to me, "Would you mind having another talk sometime?"

*Of course not. After all, I am your tutor.*

*

*Dear Lydia,*

*Yes, it has been ten days since my last letter. Sorry it took me so long to write back to you; I've had a lot on my plate to delay me.*

*First of all: please, no more checks, under any circumstances. I may not be wealthy like you are, but my parents taught me that borrowing and lending money are the last things I should ever do. I've opted to use a few of them just this once, but I will pay you back out of my tutoring wages. Don't you forget that.*

*The situation here hasn't changed much—the reason for Her Highness's inability to use magic remains unknown. She does respond to ice for just an instant, though, so that may be the key to helping her. I'm currently investigating the Howards' trove of old documents.*

*Her Highness's maid, Ellie, is something special—she has a natural talent for silent spellcasting. If she continues to improve at her current rate, I think she has a shot at placing highly in the Royal Academy entrance exam.*

*Well, that's all for today. I'll write to you again soon.*

*Yours truly,*

*Allen*

*(Buried in old books.)*

*

Ellie stood before the eight candles resting on the table. She inhaled deeply a few times; then, once her breathing had steadied, she announced, "I can do this!"

"Good," I replied. "Go ahead."

She held out her hands and deployed several spell formulae simultaneously. A flower of fire was the first to bloom, followed by flowers of wind, water, and then finally earth.

*She's improved again. She must be doing a fair bit of training on her own. I'll have to warn her not to push herself too hard.*

"Well done," I said. "I'm impressed that you're able to cast your spells so silently. Are you still struggling with lightning and light?"

"Th-Thank you very much... Uh, um... You see..." Ellie stammered for a moment before managing an explanation. "They frighten me a little...b-but I think I'll manage ice and darkness soon! I've been getting A-Anko to help me with them over the past few days."

"I was just thinking I hadn't seen Anko around lately. So, it's been in your room. My apologies for the inconvenience."

"I-It's no trouble at all." The maid giggled. "I mean, it's so, well, fluffy, for one thing."

She was doing well—well enough that I thought it might be time to start teaching her in mock combat. The problem was the girl in a blue dress who stood before just a single candle. She let out a groan; I could see frustration, irritation, and desperation clear on her face.

"Why? Why won't it work...?"

"It's all right, Tina. We still have time. You were able to detect tiny slivers of ice, weren't you?"

"I can sort of recognize them now. But Ellie is already so..." She groaned again.

I rested a hand on her head. “You’ll be fine. Let’s try a different spell formula, all right?”

“Yes, sir...” she hesitantly responded. From what I could see, she was on the verge of tears.

*Hm... Why is this happening?* I wondered. *I can’t figure it out. I should be ashamed of myself for letting this girl look so miserable.*

Her Highness had made only a little progress—her ice spells just barely produced a response, while spells of any other element vanished no matter what changes I made to their formulae. I had thus decided to focus exclusively on ice, and in this regard, my first order of business had been helping her to sense the infinitesimal slivers of ice I had managed to detect. She had been dubious at first, but a week ago she had finally succeeded. Her Highness’s first sight of the slivers had left her dumbfounded; then she had burst into tears.

“This is the first time in my life...” she had sobbed. “The first time I’ve ever been able to see my own magic...”

Her tears had come as a harsh reminder that she was more troubled than I had realized. I had reproached myself on that day, certain that there must be more I could do for her.

Since then, I had put my absolute all into my work—from morning till evening I would focus on teaching my lessons, while from dinner till midnight I would pore over documents and design new spell formulae. But even then, I hadn’t made any noteworthy progress. I was at a standstill.

Ellie was improving at an astounding rate, as she had just demonstrated. At her current pace, it seemed as though she might even manage to master all eight elements. She absorbed my spell formulae like parched soil soaks up water, and circumstances seemed to suggest she had even started receiving close-combat training from Mr. and Mrs. Walker.

I was painfully conscious of the fact that seeing Ellie’s continued progress was only making things harder for the troubled girl in front of me—after all, Ellie was her best friend as well as both an older and younger sister figure to her. The issue had remained out of sight and out of mind before now, since neither of them had been able to accomplish much with magic, but now that the difference in their abilities was so apparent...

Hypothesize, experiment, and repeat. I didn’t believe there was anything wrong with that approach, and given that I still didn't know what was causing Her Highness's impairment, my past experiences told me there was little else I could do. But when I saw her in such obvious distress... I must admit, my convictions wavered.

Lydia would certainly be upset with me—she might even put an end to our friendship—but I couldn't let that dictate my decision. If the need arose, I would link Her Highness's mana with—

"Sir?"

"Allen, sir?"

Both girls were staring at me in apparent concern.

"Oh, pardon me. I was just a little lost in thought. That's our time, isn't it? Let's call it here for today. Tina, please don't let this get you so down—there's always next time. Ellie, well done. Let's put in another good day of work tomorrow."

After dinner, I called on the duke in his office to update him on the situation.

"In other words," Duke Walter began, his voice tinged with disappointment and resignation, "teaching Tina to cast spells remains beyond even your abilities. Helping her to sense those shards of ice was an impressive feat, but as things stand..."

I was sure he had received the same report many times before, and that the news had stricken him on each occasion. Nevertheless, he had continued his search for a teacher who could grant his beloved daughter's wish. I couldn't blame him for being in this state after spending so much time and effort but having so little to show for it.

"And the same lessons are helping Ellie's talent to blossom?" The duke paused for a moment and then added, "What bitter irony."

"Her Highness has a vast supply of mana, and the construction of her spells is beyond reproach."

"And yet, as you've told me, her spells don't activate. Is that still true even with the new formulae you've devised?"

"It is. They're yielding better results than I could have hoped for with Ellie, but..."

Roughly one month had passed since I had begun practical magic lessons with my two students, and as predicted, the one to demonstrate a remarkable amount of growth in that time...had been

Ellie. I had taught her the simplified spells I had formulated—ones I had based on existing spells designed to force the activation of a single element but with an increased amount of "blank space" to leave elementals more room to do as they pleased—and she was now close to mastering them.

I no longer had any concerns about Ellie's performance in the practical; now it was merely a question of how high she would manage to place. It was possibly even time to begin teaching her magic with an eye to her studies at the academy—she was that highly motivated.

Her Highness, on the other hand...had yet to produce any favorable results. She had never been able to cast existing spells, and she fared no better with my spell formulae. I had considered that an excess of mana might be to blame and redesigned spells to reduce the supply, but as expected, they had failed to activate. I had then tried increasing the mana supply to force spells to activate, but with the same result. Did the problem lie with her mana itself, then? No, it was entirely ordinary. And there was no possibility of a curse, no matter how often I searched for one.

I couldn't help admiring the perfect construction of Her Highness's spells—it surpassed even Ellie's and was now even more refined as a result of daily practice. But...it did her no good. I was sure that her learning to recognize those slivers of ice had been a major step forward for her, but she simply couldn't progress any further. She had reached a stalemate.

We still had time, but I was beginning to lose patience. What was behind her inability to use magic?

"What is your opinion on our situation?" the duke pressed me. "There are only two months until the entrance exam."

"Am I free to speak my mind?"

"Of course."

"Her Highness *will* learn to use magic—I have no doubt about that. I just can't be certain it will happen before the entrance exam."

He mulled over my words. "Then will you work to convince her to give up, as I asked you to?"

"I will not. If she wishes to enroll in the Royal Academy, then I believe she ought to, even without the ability to cast spells."

The duke closed his eyes and sighed heavily. "You mean to say they would make an exception for her?"

"Her Highness is more than sufficiently qualified. I would question the sanity of the Royal Academy if they refused to let her attend."

"...Under any other circumstances, I would be delighted to hear that you view her so highly."

"I'm being sincere when I tell you that Her Highness's talent rivals Lydia's. Wouldn't helping her to hone her skills also be a great boon to the Ducal House of Howard?"

"I understand that—I do! But you must have experienced firsthand how troublesome the nobility can be. It would be a hard road for my girl to walk."

Duke Walter's face was suffused with anguish. I was sure he was speaking not as a duke, but as a father concerned for his daughter. The second daughter of one of the Four Great Dukedoms being unable to use magic and admitted only by special exception would obviously attract attention, and nowhere was without its share of people eager to spout nonsense.

"In any case, I do want you to make your best effort." The duke announced his conclusion with his eyes shut and his hands folded on his desk. "But if there has been no change after another month, then do as I ask."

"But sir!"

"I'm sorry, but... Please. You see how it is."

"...I understand. I may not look it, but I've accomplished the unreasonable before. I will find a way."

There was still no hope in sight, but I was determined to do something. Her Highness's mana was perfectly ordinary and there was nothing wrong with the way she constructed her spells—her impairment had to have a cause.

*My only clue is those momentary slivers of ice. I'll just have to start there.*

*

I bit back a yawn the next morning as I made for the room in the greenhouse; once again, none of the documents I had finished reading the night before had been of any help. I had stayed up until nearly dawn for several days in a row now, and exhaustion was catching up to me. I hadn't even been able to rouse myself in time for breakfast.

*This is a problem. At this rate, I'll end up making the girls worry.*

"Good morning."

I opened the door and stepped inside to find Her Highness apparently napping with her head resting on the table. She must have been tired—she had recently taken to frantically practicing magic from after dinner until late into the night. I decided to let her sleep until Ellie arrived.

I took care not to wake her as I walked over, took a seat in a nearby chair, and then cracked open the old book on magical science I had brought with me. It concerned magic predating the War of the Dark Lord. I had already confirmed that no symptoms matching Her Highness's had been reported in the past two centuries, at the very least, and for that reason I had turned my sights to even older data. The ducal house's archive was fortunately replete with old works.

Time passed in silence. It appeared that Ellie was running a bit late.

The book turned out to be the biography of a swordsman—fascinating, but unfortunately not what I currently needed. I moved to take the next book from my bag, and that was when my eyes met Her Highness's.

"Sir."

"Did I wake you? I'm terribly sorry."

"Don't be. That's a very old book, isn't it?"

"I believe it predates the War of the Dark Lord."

"Are you reading it for me?" Her Highness asked after a pause. Her tone was serious—she was quite clearly on edge.

*She's a little too studious*, I thought as I gave her a pat on the head.

"Not at all. This is something of a hobby of mine, and—"

"You're lying, sir! I know you've been staying up reading late into the night. I didn't see you at breakfast this morning either." She gave me a pointed look before resuming with a question. "How many hundreds of books have you read this past month? You search the archive every evening, don't you? And you formulate new spells for me day after day too... You're even forced to help with our evening practice."

"That's all true, but please, don't let it bother you—I love reading and enjoy improving spell formulae. I'm sorry about this morning. I don't often sleep in, so it's really rather embarrassing..."

“...set.”

Her Highness muttered something that I couldn’t quite hear. I gave her an inquiring look, at which point she leapt to her feet, trembling violently, and blurted out:

“Be more upset! Blame me more! I can’t cast spells because...because I don’t have any talent for it...”

There were tears in her eyes; it appeared she was being even harder on herself than I had suspected. Seeing Ellie make so much progress right beside her must have played a major hand in that.

“I’m sorry.” I bowed my head to her. “I’m not fit to be a teacher if I’ve caused you to say such things. That said—”

“I’ve...I’ve had enough... I respect you and I like you a lot, sir... And I love Ellie too, but...every time you praise her—every time I see her improving by the day—foul feelings well up inside me... So—!”

The next instant, a raging torrent of azure mana flooded the entire room. The area around Her Highness turned white and then began to freeze solid.

"Is this...the House of Howard's ice magic?!"

Over the past month, we had tried spells of every element. I had sensed some potential with ice magic, but it had simply refused to activate for her. So why now?

*Investigating the cause can wait. Her Highness has never so much as cast a spell before—I very much doubt she can manage this much mana.*

She was out of control, like a fully opened water pipe. No matter how immense her supply of mana was, it would soon run dry if this outpour continued. In the worst case...she would die.

"Tina!"

Her Highness screamed something in response, but I couldn't hear her. I tried to approach, but the blizzard had become a barrier between us—one that would be difficult to breach. It was all I could do to slow the spread of the ice magic. I had been trying to deploy fire spells for some time, but they were shockingly unresponsive.

What was this feeling? It was as though something were squeezing my heart in its grip. There was something there. Something unknown. Something I knew I shouldn't confront. It was the same feeling I'd gotten when Lydia and I had fought that black dragon, except this time, I was without that unstoppable albatross around my neck. What could be worse?!

I was struggling to grasp the situation. I couldn't even hear Her Highness—the fierce blizzard shut out her cries completely.

*I'm cornered... At this rate, my mana will run out before Her Highness's. What now? What should I do? Think. Think. Think!*

All of a sudden, the door slammed open.

"A-Allen, sir— Eek!"

"Mr. Allen, wh-what in the world is happening here?!"

"Ellie, stay back! Mr. Walker, please isolate this building in an ice-resistant barrier! This blizzard will engulf everything if left unchecked! Leave Her Highness to me!"

"Allen, sir...!"

"As you wish, sir. Please, take good care of the young mistress."

Mr. Walker began retreating with the uneasy Ellie in tow. That was the head butler of a ducal house for you—his decision-making was thankfully quick.

The onslaught of ice magic was ongoing and increasing in power and fury. The area around me was already turning white. I couldn't use fire spells—or I could, but only with considerable difficulty. Either way, I doubted they would last for long. Light, earth, and lightning spells were sluggish too. Water and wind spells responded...but something about them felt odd. Were they frightened, like living creatures? I had forced them to activate to slow the incursion, but they had become shockingly less mana-efficient. And as for darkness... Darkness was much too dense. If I cast a dark spell in this situation, I suspected I would also lose control of my magic.

My prior beliefs were seriously shaken. There was evidently *something* here that exerted a massive influence on water, wind, and dark magic while rendering the other elements unusable. It was going to be impossible to break through this blizzard with my skill and mana; I wasn't even certain how long I would be able to maintain my temperature-control spell.

*Perhaps I ought to resign myself to it...*

It was something I never wanted to do again, and I'd certainly never expected to be forced to make such a decision here, of all places.

I cast the most powerful water and wind spells that I could muster to forcibly interfere with the blizzard. I was well aware they would guzzle mana, so I reduced the temperature control around myself to the absolute minimum to compensate.

"Tina! Tina!" I called out to Her Highness by magic. "If you can hear me, please answer!"

"—ir!"

Her voice was barely audible, but I renewed my interference with it to guide me.

*This will be dramatically more difficult than it was with Lydia...although I'm also a little more capable than I was then.*

Somehow, I managed to establish a circuit to Her Highness. It wouldn't last long, considering the amount of mana at my disposal.

"Tina!"

"—ir! List—there's—something—me."

"Your mana is out of control right now. If it's not stopped, at worst, you could lose your life."

"—ould I do?"

Her Highness's voice came in fits and starts, but it was reaching me. Now if she would only consent to... I strained my mana and strengthened the circuit. I had a few dozen seconds at best.

"I'm about to link our mana. That way, I can bring yours under control."

"I-Is that even possible?!"

"This is how I succeeded when Lydia lost control. I know it's not a pleasant thought, but please allow me to do this!"

"All right! I don't mind! There's no problem at all! I believe in you, sir!"

Her immediate agreement left me speechless—entrusting her mana to another person wasn't a situation she could have anticipated, and it was tantamount to putting her life in that person's hands. It was something that would give anyone pause. Even I wasn't eager to do it, and I was the one making the connection. To top things off, Her Highness had only known me for less than a month. Was that really enough for her to stake her life on?

*Once I've dealt with this and completed my duty, I'll ask her why she has so much faith in me. This time, I'll see it through.*

"Thank you. Now, prepare yourself."

"Yes, sir!"

I connected the circuit, and—

An intense pain shot through me. My frail body cried out under the load of an unbelievable quantity of mana. My brain threatened to burn out. This girl's latent mana supply was on par with Lydia's...or possibly even greater. Unless I acted fast, I wouldn't last long.

Other things flooded into me along with her mana—anger, dejection, despair, impatience, and intense joy. Were these Her Highness's feelings? Her emotions were spilling out unchecked, possibly due to how deeply linked we were. Naturally, the same was true of mine.

For an instant, I glimpsed *something* that dwelt deep within Her Highness. I heard its voice. What was it...?

I forced her mana under control and calmed the blizzard. Fire returned to life as I did so, and yet...the thing I had been sensing for some time was still alive and well. My attempt hadn't completely dispelled the raging ice magic.

I pooled my own nearly exhausted mana with the mana that had escaped Her Highness and cast an imitation of the supreme fire spell Firebird.

"This should do it!"

With the fire spell at my command, I charged into the blizzard. My mock bird couldn't hold a candle to Lydia's—it disintegrated almost immediately—but it was enough. I already knew where Her Highness was. I stretched out my hands in her direction.

*Let me reach her!*

"Tina!"

"Sir!"

I grabbed Tina's hands and pulled the adorable girl into my arms. Her tiny body was trembling like a leaf; she must have been terrified. I gently stroked her back as I turned my attention to the thing that had been attempting to manifest itself. Its supply of mana had been cut off, and it was quietly fading away.

*Could that be one of the lost great spells...*

"Frigid Crane?"

"S-Sir..."

I lowered my gaze to find Her Highness blushing profusely. The circuit was still linked. I hurriedly disconnected it.

"*Ahem.* I'm glad that you're safe. I truly am."

"Th-Thank you very much, sir." There came a pause, and then she added, "Also..."

"What is it?"

"Please call me 'adorable Tina' from now on. And why have you been calling me 'Her Highness' in your thoughts?! That's forbidden! Absolutely, categorically forbidden! *And,* you've been in Ellie's room, haven't you? I demand an explanation!"

"I-I'm impressed you were able to pick up so much in such a short amount of time... Let's go call Ellie and Mr. Walker."

"No, sir. Keep holding me like this. For now—just for now—you're my tutor and no one else's."

And so, I continued holding Tina in my arms—at least until Ellie burst into the room, her face stained with tears. She wasn't massively pleased to see us like that, so I promptly let go, but then Tina became displeased, and...

*Have I done something wrong lately?*

*

I'm able to link my mana with other people's. I still remembered when I had first realized it—I had gotten separated from my younger sister while we were playing tag in the forest. I was no match for her physically and had been able to faintly sense her mana, so I had assumed she was all right and kept moving...that is, until I discovered her with an injured leg. With the benefit of hindsight, I realized that it had probably been no more than a sprained ankle, but at the time, I had been truly frantic. My sister had been bawling her eyes out, and I had only known how to cast healing spells on myself at the time.

I didn't know why, but I had gripped my sister's hand and wished to heal her pain...and it was in that instant that I felt something connect. The next thing I knew, my sister was energetically running about, shouting that her leg didn't hurt anymore. I'd actually told her this story when she entered the Royal Academy. From what I recall, she'd looked embarrassed for a moment and then said, "I remember that. You've always been a worrywart."

I had been researching my ability ever since that day, but all my attempts to discover anything about its particulars had ended in complete and utter failure. Even the libraries of the royal capital, which far outstripped those of my hometown, had offered no clues. I was consequently at a loss, though I had at least learned several things in the process of using it:

First, the person I was linked to and I shared each other's emotions and thoughts.

Second, I could control the mana of the person I was linked to, but they could not control mine.

Third, the quantity of mana I had access to depended in part on the will of the person I was linked to.

Fourth, after forming a link with a person once, it was easy to form it again.

Even those were enough to give me pause. Of course, I lacked the physical ability to handle vast quantities of mana—this meant that I could only use the ability for extremely brief periods of time and that it was far from being the answer to all my problems.

I had formed a link with just three people in my life thus far, and my connection to the third had only been established the day before. In addition to my four points, there was one more thing I had learned about my ability—something like a side effect. It was...

"Are you prepared, Tina?" I asked the girl standing ready. After a moment, she responded.

“Unacceptable. You didn’t add ‘adorable’ before my name! I demand a do-over.”

“Ellie, what do you say to a bit of one-on-one practice? I think it’s high time we finished this exercise.”

“Y-Yessir!” The maid then giggled to herself. “One-on-one.”

“Sir! Ellie! J-Jeez!”

“I’m only joking...Your Adorable Highness,” I teased.

“M-Meanie! Hmph! Suit yourselves, then. I have Anko to keep me— Ah!”

“Ah! Wh-What’s gotten into you? Th-That tickles.”

Anko, who had been curled up on a chair, had sprung up and leapt over to Ellie with startling agility. That was unusual. Perhaps it sensed danger—enough danger to merit that reaction.

“Sir...” Despite everything that had happened the previous day, Tina was bursting with energy.

“I’m watching.” I encouraged her while readying an ice-resistant barrier. “Please, don’t hold anything back. Ellie, get behind me.”

“Y-Yessir!”

“I can do this!” Tina declared, holding her hands out toward a candle. She deployed a gorgeous spell formula, and...

Her spell activated.

*Oh dear. This is more than I bargained for.*

Ellie jumped up and down, cheering “Yay!” over and over again.

“...Tina.”

“Y-Yes, sir?”

“Let’s work on your output control going forward.”

Before my eyes was a gargantuan flower of ice. It towered not only through the ceiling of the room, but through the roof of the greenhouse too. Even the broken glass, which ought to have fallen around it, was frozen solid, and the air was freezing in spite of my ice-resistant barrier. I was forced to deploy several more layers of my barrier to at last restore things to a bearable temperature.

*In terms of scale, I’d say this is on par with an advanced spell.*

It might have been preferable to a certain someone who had begun gleefully casting Firebird the second day after I had linked mana with her, but that was only a matter of degree. The ability to cast a spell on this scale would ordinarily be grounds for immediate admission to the Royal Academy; in fact, it would be grounds for admission to the Royal University. Had it purely been the fruit of hard work, I wouldn't have had such reservations about it, but—

Tina threw her arms around me without warning. Tears were streaming down her face, but something told me they were tears of joy.

"Even so, I can see how hard you've worked." I gave her a gentle hug and slowly stroked her head. "Well done. Very well done. You really are an amazing girl, Tina."

Tina shook her head, and her hair swayed in evident delight as she hugged me tighter without saying a word. It was no wonder that she was so overcome with joy—she had just successfully cast a spell for the first time in her life. Ellie must have felt the same way, because she was watching us with tears in her eyes.

"Lady Tina! Allen, sir!" She rushed over and threw her arms around us both, crushing Tina against me.

"Ellie," Tina chided her a moment later, "that hurts."

"I-I'm shooo glad," the maid sobbed. "I-I'm so, so happy for youuu..."

"Jeez. You're such a crybaby... But thank you...Ellie, sir."

Ellie must have been concerned too, especially considering that she had been making steady progress while her dear friend since childhood struggled. Although the sight of the two of them warmed my heart, I still turned my attention back to reality—to the giant flower of ice.

As far as I had seen, Tina's spell formula had been firmly within the bounds of elementary magic—and an existing formula, at that. And yet, this was the result. There could be no doubting that whatever lurked within Tina was exerting its influence. And then there were the words I had heard when we were linked:

"OH, THE KEY. AT LONG LAST, WE MEET."

I didn't really understand it; the only word I had been able to make out clearly was "key." Nevertheless, it appeared that whatever it was had stopped impeding Tina's attempts to activate spells. My control circuit also seemed to have remained within her, as in previous cases.

As a result, Tina had gained the ability to partially master her overabundant mana using my spell-control techniques. Her construction technique was already fairly refined, so all that remained was for her to adjust to the sensation of spellcasting. Once she had that down, she would have free rein over her mana...although I would probably need to prepare even stronger and more effective ice-resistant barriers in the meantime. I supposed that we ought to take our time working on the details at a later date. As for the present, it was time to rejoice. Oh, and also...

"Tina," I whispered in her ear.

"Ah!" Tina squealed. "Sh-Shir, wh-what are you...?"

"You mustn't tell anyone that we linked mana, all right? It'll be our secret."

"Our secret..." she whispered back after a pause. "Just between you and me, sir..."

"That's right."

Tina giggled in delight.

"Lady Tina. Allen, sir. Wh-Why are you whispering to each other and leaving me out?! I-It's not fair!"

"I can't tell you," Tina chirped. "It's an S-E-C-R-E-T. Isn't that right, sir?"

"Tina, stop taunting Ellie like that. Ellie, don't worry—it's nothing. Now, I suggest we clear up this mess before Mr. Walker loses his temper at us."

I took another look at the colossal flower. Power aside, the precision was astounding—it was even better than mine. Had Tina done that unconsciously? Or had it been...

There were so many things I didn't know. My own beliefs had been seriously shaken, but the two girls in front of me were smiling at each other.

*Good. As long as they're happy, the rest can wait. Including my excuses to* her.

*

*Dear Professor (surprisingly ranked "the sixth most likely teacher to lose at gambling" in the university),*

*It's been too long. A month and a half ago, a certain someone's schemes resulted in my being packed off to a snowy land. There are many things that I'd like to say to you...but I'll set them aside for the moment.*

*I'm writing to you because I need you to send me something posthaste. I believe you have contacts in military research institutes. Please send me multiple military-grade ice-resistant barrier scrolls as soon as you possibly can. The cold weather here is beyond the pale. As* *things stand, your dear student will become an ice sculpture before he returns to you come spring. Please help me. My well-being is in your hands.*

*Yours truly,*

*Allen*

*(Unable to handle heat or cold.)*

*PS: I've already informed Lydia that I'm here...but if she asks what happened in the court sorcerer exam, please don't tell her. (I assume you've already found out.) By the way, Anko doesn't seem anxious to return to the capital. Professor, have you forced it to...? If you have, I trust you're prepared for the consequences.*

*

*Dear student of mine (who appears to be a hard worker but actually aspires to be a layabout),*

*Hi there, Allen. I appreciated your letter. I'm delighted that you seem to be enjoying your time in the north. I'd actually love to join you, but as you know, I'm a busy man; I doubt I'll get a chance this wintertime, which really is a shame. Of course, I wouldn't be able to go in any case—I promised my dear, departed mother that I would only visit the Howards during the summer. Speaking of my mother, she was asking to see you just the other day.*

*Now, as for your request... It seems to me that both you and Lydia have been losing respect for me by the year. Am I just imagining things?*

*I certainly do have contacts—you wouldn't know it, but I was the previous leader of the court sorcerers. That said, diverting military technology for private use is no easy task. I'll make an exception this time and send the scrolls to you, but be more circumspect in future.*

*Your insinuations about Anko are entirely unwarranted. I may not look it, but I am the secretary of the Royal Capital Cat Lovers Association. I won't deny, however, that I showered it with too much affection. Whether Anko is a cat is also a matter for debate.*

*Also, please correct yourself—I am ranked fifth in the university.*

*I'm pleased to hear that your work seems to be going well. And be sure to send letters to Lydia, even if she doesn't answer them.*

*Yours truly,*

*A genuine hard worker and pitiable man menaced by his pupils*

# Chapter 3

"All right. Let's begin."

"Yes, sir!" Tina and Ellie's voices filled the room. I was glad to hear that they sounded like their usual cheerful, energetic selves.

It had been two months since my arrival at the Howard mansion. I had been worried about how things would turn out at first, but...

"We did it!" both girls shouted as they turned to me in unison, like small animals waiting for praise. They had conjured seven remarkable flowers between them—six by Ellie, and one by Tina.

"Tina, you're missing part of your flower because your spell formula got sloppy," I noted. "You should aim to be both fast *and* precise. Also, you used too much mana. Always remember to keep it under control."

"Y-Yes, sir."

"Ellie, are you still struggling with lightning and light? Have faith in yourself—they're really nothing to be frightened of. But if you simply can't do it, then there's nothing to be done; we'll just work on improving with other elements. Picture yourself creating your spells silently and give it another try."

"Y-Yessir."

"Sir," Tina objected a beat later, "I can't help feeling that you're being soft on Ellie but not me."

"It's just your imagination," I said. "Isn't that right, Ellie?"

"Y-Yessir. Uh, um..." Ellie stammered. "You're very nice, Allen, sir."

"Then be nice to me too," Tina demanded.

"Out of the question."

"What?! That's unfair! It's mean! It's *favoritism*! I must protest!"

"Tina..." I gave an exaggerated shake of my head and reminded her of the reality of the situation—of the gigantic flower-shaped ice sculpture currently piercing through the ceiling and roof. They had only just been repaired after the incident a few days earlier.

And yet, I didn't feel cold. I couldn't even begin to guess where the military had planned to use the ice-resistant barriers that the professor had sent me, but they were coming in incredibly handy here.

*I see... So, these spells were meant for times like this. They really are impressive.*

"Do you think," I asked Tina as I cast an ice spell to seal the hole in the roof, "that a girl who blows away ceilings, roofs, and barriers every time she casts a spell *needs* someone to be nice to her?"

"She does! She absolutely does! In fact, she isn't getting nearly enough kindness! I believe this is negligence on your part, sir! Now, give me a big hug! And be quick about it!"

*A categorical declaration?! And what an attitude.*

I had a sneaking suspicion that she was slowly but surely coming to resemble a certain someone I knew. She didn't seem to assign herself so much as an iota of blame. Should I have taught her differently? Of course, the somewhat sullen expression on her face was so adorable that I would pardon her in an instant. She definitely reminded me of a small animal.

That reminded me—I hadn't received another letter from Lydia since that first one. Had I touched a nerve by complaining about the checks? I doubted that anything was wrong—she definitely would have informed me otherwise—but I was still a little worried. You'd never guess it, but it didn't take much to make her depressed. That said, I was going to have my hands full with the final stage of the girls' training. If she wasn't going to reply, I supposed I would just have to ignore her; I wouldn't put it past her to march over here if I gave her too much attention.

*Tina, what are you looking at me like that for?*

"Sir," she said accusingly after a stony silence, "you were thinking about another girl just now, weren't you?"

"Nothing of the kind. Ellie, please continue. Tina...why don't you come with me and apologize to Mr. Walker?"

"N-No, thank you. I can't help feeling that you, Graham, Shelley, and everyone else have been awfully hard on me lately. I improve with praise, so please give me much, much more. I can't believe I've finally learned to cast spells, but all anyone does is scold me..."

"I think I'm giving you your fair share of praise. Now, let's be on our way."

"Oh, you're so mean..." Tina grumbled. She was evidently a little frustrated, but that didn't stop her from taking my hand when I offered it to her.

*Good grief. Even the way she puts up a front reminds me a little of — Hm?*

I felt something soft press against my other arm. I turned my head to find that Ellie was clinging to me.

"I-I'll come with y—"

I goggled back at Ellie in spite of myself, at which point she blushed and dropped her gaze. Maybe she had gotten embarrassed. She was indeed adorable beyond a shadow of doubt—so adorable that I would have loved to preserve her reaction in a recording.

There came a light bump on my right arm next.

*Oh. Yes, yes. Don't be so quick to become competitive, Tina. In your case, it can be a little painf— No, I'm sorry; that was a slip of the proverbial tongue. That being the case, why don't you stop trying to freeze me at close range? It's awfully chilly.*

*

"Again, sir?" Mr. Walker asked after a long pause.

"My sincere apologies. Her control is improving little by little, though. I'm sure that she'll never endanger the entire greenhouse again."

"I-I'm sorry..." Tina stammered.

"G-Grandpa, Lady Tina didn't mean any harm, so, uh, um..."

Mr. Walker had been working in his office when we came to report that we had made yet another hole in the roof that day. His hands stopped sorting papers and a look of exhaustion crossed his features.

*Yes, I'm all too well acquainted with that feeling.*

The force of Tina's ice spells made it hard to believe that she had been unable to use magic until just recently—they tore through military-issue ice-resistant barriers with ease. I was sure that the repairs would cost a fortune.

"In any case," I consoled the head butler, who looked as though he had a pounding headache, "I took emergency measures to seal the hole. I think my work should hold up until spring."

"Thank you," Mr. Walker replied after a moment. "Incidentally, Mr. Allen..."

"Yes?"

"May I take your current...*condition* as a declaration of war against me?" he asked me in a low voice, his eyes narrowing.

"Oh, well... Ah ha ha..."

I couldn't keep the strain out of my voice. Tina and Ellie were currently clinging to my arms, and Mr. Walker's expression of disapproval only made them cling tighter. I had asked them to let go as we left Tina's room in the greenhouse, but they had steadfastly refused. I had a suspicion that they were starting to become just a little willful...not that them being clear about what they wanted was a bad thing.

"You may not, Graham," Tina objected. "If you lay a hand on my tutor...I'll freeze you."

"N-No, grandpa!" Ellie added. "If you hurt Mr. Allen again, I-I'll lose my temper!"

Mr. Walker groaned. "But Lady Tina, Ellie, must you keep ahold of his arms? If you would only release him—"

"We don't want to!" the girls shouted in unison.

Mr. Walker collapsed onto his desk with an agonized grunt.

*I can't explain it... He was such a distinguished head butler when I first met him, and yet now he looks like no more than an old man grief-stricken at being robbed of the young lady and granddaughter he's tended to for so long. All right, that's enough messing around. I'd better get to the point.*

"Tina, Ellie."

"Yes, sir!" they answered together.

"I have something to discuss with Mr. Walker. Would you please return to the classroom ahead of me?"

"Sir."

"Allen, sir."

Both girls hesitated for a moment before addressing me pointedly.

"You needn't be so concerned," I assured them. "I won't be long."

They didn't seem all too happy about it, but they let go of my arms and exited the room, shutting the door behind them. I was glad they were willing to be reasonable.

*Oh dear.*

I tilted my head to one side, and a knife hand strike passed through the space it had just occupied. "The least you could do is warn me," I said.

"Prepare yourself, Mr. Allen."

"No, thank you. I have a rather serious matter to discuss with you."

"...Please be seated, sir."

How chilling. I knew that he hadn't seriously intended to harm me, but I wouldn't stand much of a chance against him in pure hand-to-hand combat—nor would I stand much of a chance against Mrs. Walker, thinking about it. The two defied belief. The duke might be the "face" of the House of Howard, but it was this old couple who administered its internal affairs. That was why I needed to come to an understanding with them now, less than one month before the entrance exam.

Mr. Walker set a cup of fragrant black tea on the table before me.

"Thank you very much."

"Now, sir, what did you wish to discuss?"

"Let me get straight to the point—I'm already confident that both of those girls will be admitted to the Royal Academy and place highly on the exam. I can't pretend that Tina—excuse me—"

"Please, Mr. Allen. Speak freely. As far as Lady Tina is concerned, no one could ever take your place now. Everyone in the mansion understands that—not least of all my wife and me. None of us would object to your omitting her title...although I suggest you still refrain in my master's presence."

"Thank you. That's quite kind of you. I can't pretend that Tina has mastered control, but I'm certain that she'll manage with another few weeks of practice. As for Ellie... Were her parents magically talented too?"

"They were both incredibly gifted," Mr. Walker acknowledged after a moment of silence, "although they refused to inherit the Walker name and instead became doctors in the royal capital. Ellie's father was the orphaned son of an old friend of mine. He and my daughter were raised together from a very young age. I had simply assumed that he would follow in my footsteps, so it came as a great shock when he announced his intention to become a doctor. He grew into a fine man, but during an epidemic in the capital..."

So, that was the whole story. It was no wonder that the Walkers doted on Ellie.

*You can rest in peace,* I mentally told Ellie's parents, whose faces I had never even seen. *Your daughter is growing into a kind, healthy young woman. Someday, she'll be one of the most renowned sorceresses in the kingdom.*

"My sincere apologies." I bowed my head to Mr. Walker. "I didn't mean to dredge up painful memories."

"Not at all, sir. I don't mind."

"As I was saying, I don't believe Ellie has anything to worry about. In particular, the silence with which she casts her spells is nothing short of magnificent. I'm told that you and Mrs. Walker are teaching her the fundamentals of hand-to-hand combat. I am instructing her as well; I hope that I can count on your continued support."

"Of course, sir. We are truly grateful for all that you've done; I never imagined that Ellie would make such dramatic progress. As the head of the Walker family, words cannot express my gratitude. Now..." Mr. Walker paused for a moment as he shifted gears. "I take it that your chief concern is my master?"

"It is."

Since my arrival, I had been giving the duke and Mr. Walker daily reports on everything that happened to Tina and Ellie. These reports were delivered either in person or in writing on occasions when it proved impossible for us to meet. Both men had initially been on the edge of their seats, swinging from joy to concern as they listened. They had even given me follow-up reports. And yet, when I'd informed the duke that Tina's mana had gone out of control and that she had subsequently cast a spell of her own volition for the very first time, he had only come to see her magic with his own eyes on a single occasion. He had left the mansion shortly after and hadn't returned since.

I understood that there had been a landslide in the duchy and that it had blocked the only road to a nearby village, leaving it isolated. The duke had apparently set out to the scene of the disaster to deal with the situation, but he was taking much too long to return. Repairs to the road had been completed relatively quickly, from what I understood, and yet the duke remained away from home. I understood that he must have many demands on his time—he was the head of the House of Howard, the guardians of the north, after all—but I couldn't help growing suspicious. There had certainly been joy on the duke's face when Tina had demonstrated her spellcasting ability, but his confusion and sorrow had been noticeably more apparent.

"I believe that both Tina and Ellie have developed a sufficient command of magic," I continued. "They won't have any trouble with the written test either. As I said earlier, I'm confident that they might even place highly, depending on their performance in the practical. And yet..." I paused a beat as I thought over how best to phrase what was on my mind. "Excuse me, but what are Duke Walter's feelings on the matter? I can't understand the striking change in his attitude since Tina learned to use magic. And assuming that he *is* dealing with issues in his duchy, he ought to be able to do so more effectively from this mansion. It's as if—"

"Mr. Allen," the head butler interjected, "your concern is quite reasonable. However...might I suggest that this is a decision for my master to make?"

"Then, if he were to forbid the girls from going to the royal capital... No, I suppose it's pointless to hypothesize. Very well. When will he return?"

"I don't know," Mr. Walker admitted. "My apologies, sir." He must have been conflicted as well, since his face was a mask of distress.

The matter was out of my hands. For the moment, all that I could do was to continue the girls' lessons and ensure that they were well prepared. I rose from my seat and was about to quit the room when I suddenly recalled something.

"There's just one thing that I'd like you to tell me about," I pressed. "Assuming that you know the answer, that is."

"What is it, sir?"

"It's about the books in the archive. There's a name that I've occasionally found written on the last page. Would you tell me whose it is?"

"I believe you have already guessed, sir."

"I see... Thank you very much."

*Well, I suppose I'll have to do something about this after all.*

*

After dinner, I took one volume from the top of the pile on my desk and began making my way through that day's haul from the archive. Anko was curled up on my other chair.

*Oh my, this will be tricky. There's a sealing spell on this one, and I can already tell that it contains an astonishing quantity of mana. They keep something like this sitting on a shelf? I'm at a loss for words.*

I was glad for the opportunity to read so many and such a variety of works during my stay at the ducal house. It had been some time since I'd last been so fortunate, considering that I had cut down on my reading time to prepare for the court sorcerer exam. I couldn't help my bibliophilia, even if the albatross *had* called me "the very definition of dull" because of it. She could be heartless, especially considering that she was quite the avid reader herself.

The book I was currently trying to read was a slim, old volume. As with most of my recent reading material, it predated the War of the Dark Lord. Tina had gained the ability to cast spells, but there was a chance she might lose it again at any moment. I wanted to have countermeasures ready, if possible, but the identity of the thing that had been preventing her remained unknown.

Back when she had lost control of her mana, I had suspected the lost great spell Frigid Crane. Thinking back on it with a cooler head, however, I couldn't help wondering whether I'd just been daydreaming. Had that thing even been a spell? It had felt more like I was confronting a living creature. I'd questioned Tina herself about it, but she had told me that she hadn't heard a voice and that she hadn't seen the being that had attempted to manifest because she'd had her eyes squeezed shut.

Then there was the one word I had been able to make out: "key." Did it refer to Tina? If not and it referred to me instead, I was at a loss; such things were beyond a humble commoner such as myself.

In any case, there was nothing wrong with adding to my store of knowledge, and there were few collections of old and rare books on the subject of magic to match this one, even in the royal capital. The Leinster archive had impressed me as well, but I suspected that it contained more old account books and statistical records, relatively speaking. The House of Leinster was accomplished economically as well as militarily.

A reserved knock interrupted my musings.

"Come in," I told my late visitor. "It's not locked."

The door swung slowly open, and in came two girls in their nightgowns. They had jackets on, but the outlines of their bodies were still apparent. Tina still seemed much like a child; she was only thirteen, so I supposed she had a lot of growing to do. Ellie, who trailed after her, on the other hand... Now that I saw her in her nightgown, her femininity was hard to completely ignore. She was only a year older than Tina, but the difference was... *Ahem.*

"Good evening. What's the matter?" I asked.

"Well," Tina began hesitantly, "Ellie says that she can't get to sleep."

"L-Lady Tina, th-that's not fair! You *just* told me that book we read together frightened you so badly that you can't sleep, so you came to my room and— Eek!" Ellie was in such a fluster that she stepped on the hem of her nightgown and seemed in danger of once again falling over.

"Whoa there," I said as I rushed to catch her. "That was a close one."

*This girl really is prone to tripping. Wait. Oh no. I dropped that old book I was studying. I recommend against touching it, Anko; I suspect it's quite dangerous.*

I felt something soft against my arm, and I could tell exactly what it was—especially because Ellie was wearing thinner garments than usual. I hurriedly attempted to release her, but she was actively holding on to me.

*Um...*

"Allen, sir. Y-You see, um, I..."

"All right, that's quite enough!" Tina interjected, forcing her way between us. She pushed Ellie aside and grabbed hold of my arm herself. "Ellie, you tripped on purpose, didn't you?"

*How odd... Why does this feel nowhere near as soft? Wait, no! I have a premonition that I'll end up frozen if I pursue that line of thought, and no one knows better than I do to trust my intuition at times like this. Don't think about it. That way lies disaster.*

The two girls continued to fool around, unaware of the less-than-courteous thoughts running through my mind.

"Th-That'sh..." Ellie stammered for a moment before finding her words. "That's not true. I-I would never think anything so presumptuous as wanting Mr. Allen to hug me, or— Ah!"

"You're such a liar! And you're just as bad, sir! That look on your face was...indecent. And you didn't react at all when *I* grabbed your arm. I request—no, *demand*—a do-over! This instant!"

*Oh dear. They've dragged me into it.*

"Girls," I replied with feigned exasperation, "it's late, and you should both be in bed. You'll never get any taller if you don't get your beauty sleep. You can stay here if Tina really is frightened, but only for a little while. I'll warm up some milk for you both, so please let go of me."

"Y-You have it all wrong. I'm not the least bit scared." Tina began to protest, but then she suddenly turned sheepish. "Well, I am just a little bit. And I can't help feeling that you reacted differently to Ellie!"

"It's just your imagination," I insisted. "Now, take a seat in that chair."

"Oh, you're so mean, sir. Dummy."

I listened to Tina call me names as I picked up the old book I had dropped on the floor. It was then that a thought struck me.

*I was wrong. This isn't a spell book.*

It was too thin. Could it be a personal diary? But then why was it sealed with such an unbelievably powerful curse, one that was maybe even on par with a military barrier? If the diary's owner had gone to such lengths...they must have been an astonishing person. I pondered the diary's past owner as I stood up and laid it on the desk.

I removed a glass bottle of milk from my room's icebox, filled two wooden cups from it, and, after a little thought, added some honey to them.

*Hm? What is it, Anko? You'd like some too? I suppose I'll have to humor you. I'll pour some into a saucer and— What? It's too cold for you? I thought cats hated hot food.*

Despite my exasperation, I warmed the saucer of milk slightly. Anko then began to lap it up with gusto. Much like its master, the familiar was too particular in its tastes.

I turned around to discover that, for some reason, the girls had opted to sit on my bed rather than in the available chairs. Tina was still visibly pouting.

"Here you are." I proffered them the cups with a wry grin.

"Thank you, sir," Tina conceded after a final moment of petulant silence. "Oh. It's warm already?"

"Thank you very much, Allen, sir. Did you use a spell to heat our drinks?"

"Yes, although it's a bit different from ordinary temperature control, so you need to get a knack for using it. It's a little trick for when you want a hot drink in a hurry. I'll admit though—I'm not sure why, but drinks taste far better when heated in a pot. I'd suggest that you take that little extra time and effort if you ever make some for your future husbands."

"Husbands, sir?"

"Ah..."

Tina and Ellie both shot me repeated glances, their cheeks noticeably flushed. Perhaps that had been too exciting of a thought for young ladies their age. I mused over this as I walked over to one of the free chairs, but no sooner had I taken a seat than Tina started patting the bed with one hand. Ellie was staring at me as well, though I couldn't say for what reason.

"Why won't you join us, sir?" Tina asked—though it came across as more of a demand. "Your simply adorable student is right here."

"Th-That's right! And, um, her adorable maid too..." Ellie seemed to become less and less confident in her words until, soon enough, her voice faded out completely. She then let out an embarrassed little cry.

"No," I replied flatly. "You're both growing young ladies, so you really shouldn't be visiting a man's room at this time of night. Men are wolves, after all."

"You looked awfully happy to hug Ellie just now," Tina pointed out accusingly. "Are you a wolf too, sir?"

Ellie's eyes widened at the idea.

"That's a secret," I replied to Tina after a pause. "Ellie, is something the matter?" The maid had collapsed onto the bed and was groaning with her face pressed into the blankets.

*What have we here? Well, she doesn't seem ill, so I think I'll leave her to her own devices.*

"It's late and you have a full day of lessons tomorrow, so please go to bed once you've finished your milk. If you're simply too afraid, then you may stay for a little while longer—I'll be up anyway, after all. But only if you're quiet. I'll be in trouble if Mr. and Mrs. Walker find out."

"I-I told you, I'm not *that* scared of..." Tina let her words trail off and then changed the subject. "Have you always read so much, sir? Even before you got here?"

"I've always liked to read; it's just about my only hobby that's actually useful. As you know, I don't have a great deal of mana. Supreme spells are obviously beyond me, and while I might be able to formulate advanced spells, I'm not capable of activating them."

I wasn't able to become the best at swordsmanship, magic, or academics—not that I was complaining—but I thought that I could at least read as much as the next person.

On that note, I dispelled part of the seal on the diary I was attempting to look at. When I gingerly opened it, however, I found that its pages were pitch-black.

*Well now... Unreadable already?*

The author had certainly been thorough, and I couldn't help but feel a slight sense of kinship with them. I tore away another small part of the spell to reveal an incomprehensible string of letters.

*A cipher...? Whoever wrote this really didn't want anyone else to read it.*

Two sealing spells and now this code. It was going to be tough to decipher immediately. I knew that many old books were imbued with spells, but what could justify this level of security?

I closed the diary and placed it atop the pile of documents I was saving for later; anything that would take time to read through could wait. I made up my mind that I would foist the diary on the professor or the headmaster at a later date, assuming I could convince the duke to lend it to me.

Next was... No, I knew this wouldn't work. I stood up, scratched my head, and then scooped up Tina, who had been happily watching me the entire time. She was still light as a feather.

"Huh? Um, s-sir?"

"There." I gently tossed her into bed, pulled the covers over her, and then moved my chair to the bedside. "Please go to sleep; I can't concentrate with your eyes on me. Don't worry, though—I won't go anywhere. You too, Ellie. Feel free to sleep here tonight. I don't mind."

"Y-You mean it, sir?!" Tina exclaimed.

Ellie giggled and said, "Excuse me, Lady Tina," before burrowing under the covers beside her with a cheerful smile. I could hear them both laughing between themselves.

*Good grief...*

I picked up the next book in my pile and started to read.

*Well now. A magic textbook written approximately two centuries ago.* Compared to that diary, it was a quick and easy read. *Hm? A bookmark. What's this? Activating ice spells from underground. So, that's how they used it...*

It wasn't long before I heard the girls' breathing fall into a peaceful rhythm. They were sleeping soundly, hand in hand. *I want to help them attend the Royal Academy together*, I thought from the bottom of my heart as I stroked Anko, who had climbed onto my lap.

When I reached the end of the textbook, I came across a personal bookplate that I had seen on the final page of a great many works over the past two months. No one would collect this many books for their own personal reading—particularly not this many textbooks. These must have been...

In any case, I would need to speak with the duke while I made preparations. I didn't care who he was; I would make him keep his promise.

*

I spent several days waiting patiently while I instructed the girls. I was confident that the duke would come to speak to me; after all, there was less than a month until the Royal Academy entrance exam, meaning there wasn't much time left to apply or make arrangements for travel to the royal capital.

And then, the moment arrived.

I was teaching Tina and Ellie in the greenhouse room that day when Mrs. Walker nervously entered. "Mr. Allen, the master would like to see you in his office," she said. "Lady Tina, Ellie, I have sweets for you. Please follow me."

"Very well. Tina, Ellie, please take a short break."

"Yes, sir," both girls answered cheerfully.

I couldn't let anything darken their smiling faces. I was their tutor, after all.

*Don't worry, Mrs. Walker. Please take good care of them.*

"I've given the matter a lot of thought," the duke announced gravely, leaning deeply into his chair, "and decided not to submit Tina's and Ellie's applications to the Royal Academy."

That was just what I had expected to hear. Mr. Walker, who was waiting deferentially to one side, narrowed his eyes slightly.

"But why?" I asked with a slight look of confusion. "At their current level, Her Highness and Ellie are both sure to earn not only their admissions to the Royal Academy, but even high ranks on the exam. Please, tell me—why give up at this stage? Surely you don't demand that they place first and second in their class?"

"Nothing of the kind," the duke said after a moment of silence. "I cannot thank you enough for what you've accomplished. I never imagined that not only Ellie, but Tina as well would gain a command of magic. I can see that the professor was speaking the truth when he said that 'Allen and Lydia effortlessly make the impossible possible.'" He paused again and then added, "As far as Ellie is concerned, I'm perfectly willing to abide by Graham and Shelley's decision."

"In that case, Her Highness should also be afforded—"

"No. I cannot permit it. I do believe that my girl has learned to cast spells, but she has far too little experience with magic. It would be madness for a child like her to attempt the Royal Academy's practical exam. You know how much mana she has. She may have power, but can she control it? I'm receiving reports that she's been destroying the greenhouse roof almost daily, even after the attempt I witnessed. Even if she does manage to pass the entrance exam, she'll be nothing but a nuisance to the other students. Besides which..." The duke hesitated a third time before shaking his head. "No, that's no concern of yours."

"Then why did you hire me?" I demanded of the scowling duke. "It doesn't make sense."

He remained silent, so I answered my own question.

"You summoned me here solely as a tool to force Her Highness to abandon her dream of going to the Royal Academy. From the very beginning, you were convinced that my task was impossible. Am I wrong?"

"I regret the way I've treated you," the duke admitted after a long pause. "Of course, I will pay you for your work. I'll even double—no, triple—your fee."

"Don't be absurd."

Both the duke and Mr. Walker looked at me in consternation. *Oh, this won't do; I put a little too much animosity into that,* I realized, and so I forced a smile to compensate.

"With all due respect, Your Highness, Duke Walter Howard...you are utterly blind."

"...I'm *what*?"

"First of all, you claim that Tina will be a nuisance to her fellow students, but she's already learned much in the way of control over the past few days. If the academy would still consider her too much of a nuisance now, they'll be able to count this year's new admittees on one hand. My heart goes out to them. Oh, my humble apologies, but I've been deceptive in my reports over the past few days; since you refused to return to your mansion, I took the liberty of reusing old ones. You would have spotted that at once if you had been paying them any attention."

"What?!"

"Second, you aren't the only person this matter concerns. Tina wishes for this—as does her mother, your late wife. I'm shocked that you would come to such a decision without so much as making an effort to gauge your daughter's progress for yourself. Can the current Duke Howard, head of one of the Four Great Dukedoms, truly be such a small-minded man?"

"How would you know what my wife would want?! This is no concern of yours! If you're merely trying to anger me..."

"I do know. The contents of your archive make it obvious."

I could see bewilderment on his face. It was as I thought—he hadn't noticed. I chuckled as I thought about Tina's mother—a woman whom I had never met, but who I was confident had been fond of mischief. Only an avid reader would understand her legacy. But then, she must have had faith—faith that someone would figure it out.

"Third," I continued, "I made a promise to those girls—a promise that I would get them into the Royal Academy. And I'm sorry to say that I've never broken a promise in my life. I don't care how powerful and important a nobleman you are; I refuse to break my word on your say-so, especially as you once told me in no uncertain terms that you would support Tina if she learned to use magic. You even swore it on your late wife. Was that a lie?"

"Y-You see..."

"I don't mind if it was. However... Oh, I know. I'll take out a full-page ad in every newspaper in the royal capital. It'll read: 'Duke Walter Howard can't keep his word even when he swears on his late wife. Regard him accordingly.'"

"Y-You couldn't possibly—"

"Your Highness, my father taught me that a man who swears on the deceased and still breaks his word is less than scum—that he's not even worth speaking of and would be better off dead himself, whatever his station. That's what you've just told me you intend for yourself.”

I bowed deeply to the duke, who maintained a wrathful silence. "I implore you, see and experience for yourself what backbreaking efforts your dear daughter Tina has made and just how much strength she's gained. If you still find her lacking...then that is my failing as her teacher. I will gladly accept any punishment you see fit to assign me for my incompetence and for my impertinence."

When the duke finally broke his silence, his anger had vanished. "You are...far too kind..." he murmured. He closed his eyes in consideration for a moment and then quietly announced, "Very well. But on one condition."

*

"A-A final exam?!" Tina and Ellie exclaimed.

"That's right," I casually informed them as we sipped our tea in Tina's greenhouse room. "Please relax; it's nothing to worry about."

*I need to stay calm too*, I told myself. *I can't afford to let my nerves get the better of me.*

"You've both worked incredibly hard, and I'm confident you'll have no trouble earning your admission to the Royal Academy. From today onward, I'm going to give you mock questions I've drawn up based on my predictions. I'd like you to solve them in preparation for the written test. As far as the practical is concerned, hardly any of the other applicants will hold a candle to you."

"And it's all thanks to you, sir."

"Y-Yessir. It's because we had you to teach us."

"I'm delighted to hear you say so, but this is the result of your daily efforts. All I've done is spend night after night reading and give you a little helping hand."

"That's not true, sir! I mean... You gave me magic!"

"Th-That's right, Allen, sir! If not for you, I-I would have been hopeless forever."

"Thank you for your kind words, but please, try not to sell yourselves so short—although I realize that's something of a habit of mine as well. Both of you truly are charming, and you have bright futures ahead of you. I'm sure you'll go on to become even more charming and amazing."

Both girls let out little exclamations of embarrassment. I had only given them my honest opinion, but for some reason, they were hanging their heads and blushing even more fiercely than usual. I wondered why; I was certain that I was always telling them much the same thing.

"You're just a little mean, sir, but you always pick times like this to really speak your mind... I can tell that you really mean it... Dummy."

"Um, uh... You see... A-Allen, sir, I wuv you..."

Tina and Ellie were muttering under their breaths, but I couldn't make out a word of what they were saying. They did get like this from time to time—as did Lydia, now that I thought about it. Did they all have something in common?

"S-So, what is our final exam going to be?"

"O-Oh! Yesh—" Ellie began, but then she stopped and corrected herself. The way she stumbled over her words always warmed my heart. "Yes, please tell us."

"Duke Walter told me that, under normal circumstances, he would have liked to test your abilities himself," I explained. "But he's a very busy man, and it seems unlikely that he'll actually be able to make time. Therefore—"

"Oh, I know," Tina cut me off.

"W-We just have to beat you, right, Allen, sir?" Ellie chimed in. "If we win, then, um, even after we go to the academy, would you —"

"Ellie, didn't we just agree to bide our time?! We were supposed to ask him together!"

"M-My grandma taught me that all's fair in love and war!"

"Even Shelley's against me?! Sir, I won't hold back!"

"I think there's been a misunderstanding... I'm not the one you'll be fighting."

*How unsettling...* It appeared that my students had made it their goal to defeat me, and I'd been none the wiser. The way girls thought was— No, that wasn't quite true. The way *the girls around me* thought started out laudable and then became steadily more forceful over time. I had hoped that Tina and Ellie wouldn't go down that same road, but...

"Duke Walter is going to provide your opponent. His choice will be a force to be reckoned with, so don't let your guards down. Your final exam will take place three days before you're to depart for the royal capital. Let's work on as many details as we can in the meantime.”

“Yes, sir!” my adorable students answered. It was too bad for the duke, but for their sake, I wasn’t going to hold anything back.

*

After a gulp of cold, slightly sweetened milk, I couldn’t resist smacking my lips appreciatively. It was strange how much better it tasted after a hot bath.

I didn’t know whose idea it had been to put an icebox and a large, soft couch one could lounge on in a large room near the baths, but they had known what they were about. They had even made a point of setting out glass cups, although the Howards generally used wooden ones during meals and on other occasions.

I normally took my baths quite late. That day, however, I had decided to try bathing earlier than usual, which had resulted in my having the baths and the lounge to myself. It certainly had its benefits—I typically ended up sharing both with the servants of the ducal house, who more often than not gave me a hard time. They were pleasant people and a pleasure to talk to, at least for the most part, but they could be uncomfortably...*persistent* in their questions about my relationship with Tina and Ellie. They had lost their tempers when I said that I wouldn’t marry either girl, and then they had lost their tempers again when I had joked that I would. Those two girls truly were well loved...although I suspected that love could be a little suffocating.

The sun had already set, so the world through the large windows was pitch-dark, but the sound of the wind told me that there was a blizzard raging outside. The snow just kept coming down day after day. I personally didn’t mind this cold, however, because the mansion—especially this part of it—benefited from geothermal heating.

From my perspective, the Howard mansion housed two astonishing facilities. One was Tina’s familiar greenhouse, and the other was the massive baths I had just exited, which were large enough to swim in. As one would expect, the baths were divided into men’s and women’s sections. They weren’t filled with ordinary bathwater either—the place was a natural hot spring. I doubted there were more than a few other baths in the kingdom that could match them.

As the story went, the first Duke Howard had been fanatical about bathing to the point that he had decided to build his headquarters over the hot spring. Assuming this was true, I was sure that he and I would have made for good friends indeed.

I didn't handle cold weather well, partly because I had never been anywhere that got so much snow before, so I truly appreciated the opportunity to thoroughly warm myself every day. It also helped wash away my weariness after a day of work, and I even suspected that it had made my skin smoother. Enjoying a delicious drink of cold milk afterward was another welcome benefit.

I wondered what I ought to do once I returned to my room. I still had more books to read, and I needed to make preparations for the girls' final exam. I also needed to write *her* a letter, now that I had a little free time.

As I sunk into the couch and sipped from my glass cup, a girl emerged from the women's baths. She was dressed in her nightgown, with a cloth bag in her hand and a towel wrapped around her head. And for some reason, she froze when she spotted me.

*What have we here?*

"Oh, Ellie. Were you taking a bath too?"

"Y-Yessir. Huh? A-Allen, sir... Y-You're not usually here this early... I-I thought you bathed later..."

"I thought I'd try taking my bath early for a change. Hadn't you better dry your hair?"

"W-Well, um... Y-You see..." she stammered bashfully. "I-I normally do dry it. I-It's just that today I, um..."

Her eyes were on my glass cup; it seemed she had been unable to resist the lure of a cold drink after a hot bath. Perhaps she was taking after her tutor.

"What would you like to drink?" I asked her, rising with a chuckle and opening the icebox.

"Oh, um... I-I'll have what you're having, shir..."

I poured milk into one of the waiting cups, moved to stand behind the couch with the drink, and then beckoned to Ellie with my free hand. She looked confused.

"Take a seat," I urged her. "I'll dry your hair while you drink."

Ellie didn't respond; instead, her eyes widened and she started fidgeting. Perhaps she considered it an unwelcome offer.

"I won't do it if you don't want me to."

“I-I do want you to,” Ellie shot back. She then raced to the couch, sat down, and turned her head to look at me. “P-Please, sir. Go ahead.”

“You needn’t be so nervous. Now, if there’s any special way you’d like me to do this, don’t hesitate to say so. But would you mind if I borrowed your brush?”

“N-Noshir.”

I took Ellie’s hairbrush from her and handed her the cup in exchange. The contented way she held it in both hands and sipped at it gave me a warm, pleasant feeling inside.

*I’d better wipe her hair dry to begin with*, I thought as I unwrapped the towel from her head. *Well now...*

“Allen, sir?” Ellie turned to look at me, curious as to why I had stopped moving.

“Oh, I was only thinking that you look just as charming with your hair down.”

“Ah... I-I don’t really think sho, shir...” Ellie replied, her nape flushing even redder. We continued to chat as I set about gently toweling her hair, until eventually...

*There. That ought to do it.*

I formulated a spell with my left hand, raising a warm breeze to blow against Ellie’s head. “Huh?” she said with a start. “I-Is this...? But there’s no air heater here...”

"Oh, excuse me. Did I startle you?"

I set about drying Ellie's long hair from the roots to the tips while maintaining the spell with my left hand. Ellie must have found it quite pleasant because she partly shut her eyes and let out a contented little moan; she looked as if she might drift off to sleep at any moment. I took her cup from her so that she wouldn't drop it and set it down on the table in front of her.

*This really takes me back. I used to do this for my younger sister back home when—*

"Aaah!" A scream shattered the silence. "Wh-What do you think you're doing?!"

I glanced in the direction of the cry without stopping what I was doing and was utterly unsurprised to see Tina. It seemed that, like Ellie, she had succumbed to temptation—she had a towel wrapped haphazardly around her head and was frantically waving her cloth bag around.

*Hey now. Watch where you're swinging that.*

She strode boldly up to the table, seized the cup, drained it in one gulp, and then smacked her lips in appreciation. "That was delicious. Now... Sir, Ellie, what is going on he— Is she asleep?"

"It appears so, so please, keep your voice down." I put my right index finger to my lips without setting down Ellie's hairbrush and winked.

Tina was visibly pouting but took a seat beside Ellie nonetheless. After a brief silence, she announced, "It's my turn next, sir."

"Oh really? I don't know about that."

"What is there to consider? This is a chance to fondle your ever-so-adorable student's hair to your heart's content. You should count yourself very fortunate!"

"You'll wake Ellie. Also, I don't quite approve of the way you phrased that. Tsk, tsk."

"You're never this strict with anyone else, sir..."

"Not at all. Wait a moment; I'm almost done here."

It was time to switch the breeze from warm to cool—but first, I wiped a bit of drool from around the happily dozing maid's mouth with a handkerchief. Once that was done, I sent a brisk gust through her whole head of hair, and she woke up.

"Huh?"

"There we are. Good morning."

"A-Allen, sir! I, u-um, well..."

"Ellie. You were drooling. Did you know that?" Tina gibed.

"L-Lady Tina! Huh? Uh..." Ellie groaned in embarrassment.

"Hey now. Don't tease her," I admonished Tina. "There, all done. What do you think?"

Ellie ran her fingers through her hair, blushed slightly, then immediately stood up and bowed deeply to me. "Th-Thank you very much, sir!"

"It was no trouble, Ellie. You looked adorable in your sleep."

"Oh, A-Allen, sir... You don't have to flatter me..."

"I'm being sincere."

"Huh?" Ellie took a moment to process that before venturing a tentative, "Um, thank you, shir..."

"Sir, Ellie," Tina interjected after a pause, "aren't you forgetting about someone?"

*Oh dear. This won't do.* I sent a blast of cold air at the pouting young noblewoman. *I'm sorry to have to cool you down when you've just finished warming up, but...*

"Yes, yes. Thank you for waiting."

"A single 'yes' will suffice."

"...Tina. Please don't say that. I mean it. I hear it often enough from Lydia already."

"Sir, I suggest you put your hand on your heart and seriously reconsider your attitude toward your students," Tina remarked. A beat later, she added, "And why are you so good at drying girls' hair? It's strange. It's curious. It's *suspicious*. I demand a satisfactory explanation."

"Oh, that's simple—I have a younger sister, and I often used to help her with things like this when we were little."

"You have a sister, sir?"

"Yes. She's currently a student at the Royal Academy."

Tina's eyes widened. "Th-That means she'll be our upperclassman when..."

Ellie let out a flustered exclamation. "I-I'm already getting n-nervous!"

While the girls were talking, I unwrapped the towel around Tina's head and began gently wiping down her hair with it. She didn't seem much different from normal, but her hair certainly was gorgeous.

*Come now, keep your head still.*

“Tina, hand me your brush,” I said.

“Just use Ellie’s. She always lets me use it anyway.”

“Very well then.”

I set about gently drying Tina’s hair with a warm breeze. Before I knew it, her breathing had settled into the regular rhythm of sleep. *That was quick...* I smiled wryly to myself and continued to work slowly so as not to wake her.

Ellie, who appeared to have finally calmed down, sat down quietly beside Tina. “Allen, sir... Does your sister really go to the Royal Academy?” she asked me.

“She does. I got a letter from her just the other day; she seems to be doing well.”

“Th-Then your sister is going to be our upperclassman...”

“I’d love it if you made friends with her. She’s a nice girl, although I know I’m not exactly impartial. Of course, you’ll have to pass your exams first.”

“Y-Yessir. I’ll do my besht—uh, best.” Ellie corrected herself with a little embarrassed groan, and I couldn’t help but chuckle.

“You truly are charming, Ellie.”

“What about me, sir?” Tina interjected after a moment of silence. She looked up at me with drowsy, half-open eyes—a gesture that was lent a fiendish power when coupled with her glistening hair and extreme youth. I roughly tousled her freshly dried hair to mask my embarrassment, which made her cry out in surprise. “Wh-What is it, sir?! What’s gotten into you?”

“Nothing at all. There, all done. Ellie, please comb Tina’s hair for her.”

“Y-Yessir.”

“Y-You ought to finish what you started,” Tina objected. “Besides—is that any way for you to treat me?”

I shot Tina a quizzical look. There was absolute certainty in her eyes as Ellie ran the brush through her hair.

*Wh-What in the world...?*

“Sir.”

“Y-Yes?”

“You’ll accompany us to the royal capital, won’t you?”

“I suppose so. My job is to guide you both until you’re admitted to the Royal Academy, and I’ll stand by you until that happens.”

"...I wish that weren't the end, but it'll do for now. In that case, what will you do about Lady Lydia? I'm told that she's returned to her family home for now, but I've never heard of the two of you being apart for so long before. I'm sorry that it's partly my fault, but isn't she sure to return to the capital to see you?" Tina let that statement hang in the air for a moment before she chirped, "I can't wait to see her. It's been ever so long!"

I gulped. W-Was Tina threatening to tell *her* everything, including that I'd just dried two girls' hair? I-If that happened—I shuddered slightly—there was a strong possibility *she* would attack me with her sword in earnest, as if she hadn't gotten me to do her hair any number of times in the past.

"Very well. You win." I admitted defeat with a sigh and pressed my hands to my temples.

"Oh, really?" Tina gloated triumphantly. "Actions speak louder than words. Now, brush my hair."

"Very we—"

"There you are, Lady Tina. All done." Ellie cut my acquiescence short. Her hands moved rapidly, fixing Tina's hair in the blink of an eye.

*Now that was quick work.*

"...What was the meaning of that, Ellie?" A disgruntled Tina questioned her maid while I admired Ellie's handiwork. "I wanted our tutor to do that for me."

"I'm your personal maid, Lady Tina," Ellie replied with unusual composure.

"I didn't ask you to do it."

"I don't think you ought to impose on Mr. Allen."

"Oh, it's all your fault, sir! You always spoil Ellie and never me!"

"I don't agree," I replied. "I'm confident that I'm pampering both of you. However..."

"However?"

"I just can't get enough of your funny faces."

"You're such a dummy, sir! Meanie! I'm through with you!" Tina's pouting intensified as she leapt to her feet and strode away as dramatically as she had come. Perhaps I had teased her just a little too much.

"L-Lady Tina, wait for me!" Ellie called out. "Allen, sir, um..."

"Don't worry about it. I'll see you in your lessons tomorrow.

Give my best to Tina as well."

"Y-Yessir."

And with that, Ellie hurried off after Tina.

*Remember to watch your step, Ellie. Now, it's high time I got back to my room and—*

All of a sudden, I could feel eyes on me. I turned to look and spotted a few locks of pale blue hair poking around a corner of the hallway. As I drew closer, I overheard voices whispering.

"H-Honestly, Lady Tina. Why do you take that tone with Mr. Allen? I know he's really nice, but..."

"W-Well... You're lucky, Ellie—you got him to do your hair all the way. I didn't. It's not fair. It's not like I don't want him to—"

"What would you like me to do for you?" I asked.

The girls must have been shocked to see me poke my head around the corner because they seized each other by the hand, turned their backs on me, and then fled as fast as their legs would carry them. Their hair glistened in the light, and as I watched them go, I wondered whether I ought to style it differently for them next time. Then again, I had a feeling that would only lead to more pestering.

As they sprinted off down the hallway, Tina turned to look behind her. Had she dropped something? No, that wasn't it—she stuck her tongue out and pulled a face at me, then continued running away.

I chuckled; she was still such a child.

*Yes, I've made up my mind: I'll spend this evening writing a letter to another child—to Lydia. I'm certain she's sulking. Whatever I end up doing once I've finished my job as Tina and Ellie's tutor, I'd like to meet with her face-to-face again. That's the polite thing to do, even if I might not tell her the whole truth about the court sorcerer exam. I've received my wages, so I'll send this one by griffin mail.*

*

*Dear Lydia,*

*It's been too long since my last letter. I know you're angry, so let me begin with excuses.*

*As I informed you in my first letter, I'm currently engaged as a private tutor to the Ducal House of Howard. I believe I've already mentioned this as well, but my students are Duke Howard's second* *daughter, Tina, and her personal maid, Ellie. They're both extremely talented, and I have no doubt that they'll be admitted to the Royal Academy. Yes, both of them.*

*I'm certain that you're more knowledgeable about this sort of thing than I am, but it was apparently common knowledge among the nobility that the Howards' second daughter couldn't use magic. Well, it wasn't easy, but matters worked themselves out, and Tina cast her first spell one month ago. It's quite true; I'm teaching her basic control techniques now.*

*I'm glad that she can cast spells now, but...her mana is as powerful as yours—possibly a little too strong. She's also skilled at spell construction. Imagine yourself when you first learned magic, firing off spells at full power and rapid speed. What a nightmare. I doubt that any prospective students who come up against her in the practical will be able to do anything but weep.*

*That said, she's still inexperienced and anxious, much like you used to be. She's no swordswoman, which makes her a little easier to deal with than a certain someone I know, but I still think mana this powerful is quite a problem. So, between teaching Tina to control her mana and advising Ellie, I've been swamped with work recently, and I simply didn't have the time to write to you. I'm sorry.*

*That concludes my excuses.*

*I really am sorry. Please believe me—I meant no offense in my last letter. I simply don't want to make our relationship a financial one.*

*Oh, enough of that. This isn't like me.*

*I'll be departing the Howard mansion in a few days, so expect my next letter to come from the royal capital. Will I be able to see you there? There are things I'd like to discuss with you, so I hope we can arrange a meeting.*

*Also...just for your information, once my students receive their exam results, I intend to return to my hometown.*

*Yours truly,*
*Allen*
*(Still a private tutor in a snowbound land.)*

*

*Dear Mr. Coldhearted,*

*I understand your situation...and I'll admit, I overdid it with the checks, so I'm not mad at you. Not one bit.*

*I'm also not even the teeniest, tiniest bit bothered that you're being awfully nice to a pair of girls you've only just met, so don't let that concern you. I wonder, have you ever done anything like that for me? I'm devastated. I can hardly believe that the man I've spent these past few years with fancies little girls... Oh, but don't mind me. I know those children mean more to you than I do.*

*But in all seriousness, do you really expect me to believe that girl learned magic? She's never managed to cast a spell in her life. Are you lying? Is this some kind of joke? What kind of trick did you use to—*

*I'm sure you wouldn't dare, but you didn't end up doing the same thing you did with me, did you? Even you must understand what that would mean; I even wrote to you about it. So, I'm sure you found some other way.*

*But if I'm wrong... Well then...let's have a nice long talk on a number of subjects. And I still need you to tell me all about how you failed the court sorcerer exam, don't I? It just makes no sense...*

*Let's meet in the royal capital, no matter what.*

*Also, who gave you permission to hole up in your hometown? I certainly didn't, and I don't intend to. The possibility is nil.*

*Yours truly,*

*Lydia*

*(Planning to interrogate a suspected lover of little girls.)*

*PS: My little sister is sulking because you should have just become her tutor instead. Make sure to comfort her yourself. I've spent the past three months putting her through intensive training, so if you think your students are going to beat her and take first place on the exam, you have another thing coming. Don't forget—you're no match for me!*

*Send me a letter when you leave the north! And be sure to address your next one to the Leinster house in the capital.*

# Chapter 4

Ellie lunged toward me with a sharp cry. She closed distances as well as I would expect from someone who was receiving direct instruction from Mr. and Mrs. Walker. Her training may only have begun in earnest recently, but they had probably been preparing her for it for quite some time.

I almost smiled with joy in spite of myself when—

*Whoops!*

I retreated to evade Ellie's knife hand strike, only to step on something...unusual. The next thing I knew, I could feel my left foot sink into the ground and my leg froze solid.

"You fell for it!" Tina cheered. "Today's the day I finally beat you!"

"Y-You mean, today's the day *we* beat him, Lady Tina!"

I was glad the two girls were such good friends, but I would have to deduct points from them for losing focus during combat. As they continued to banter, I used a temperature-control spell to melt the ice and escape. I then closed in on Ellie in an instant, seized her left hand, and hurled the startled maid skyward.

"Ellie!" I heard Tina shout as I kicked the ground and accelerated, weaving a spell as I went. "Th-This isn't over! I haven't lost yet!" She readied her training wand, and a beat later, a barrage of ice balls appeared. There were more than I could count, and they were barreling toward me.

*Good. Just as I predicted.*

I cast fire spells to intercept Tina's projectiles in midair and simultaneously activated a water spell to cover the area in an artificial mist that obscured her vision.

"Huh? I-I can't see anything in this..."

"L-Lady Tina?"

Both girls sounded confused; it seemed that they still relied on their eyes more than mana detection to track me. I would need to work with them on breaking that bad habit. As for me, I was able to sense them both clearly. Ellie had landed softly with the aid of a wind spell, while Tina was erecting a wall of ice in an attempt to shore up her defenses. Therefore...

"That's cold!"

"Eek!"

"There," I said plainly. "Tina, Ellie—you lose."

After striking both Tina and Ellie on the forehead with a drop of water and declaring my victory, I dispersed the mist with a light clap of my hands. The shocked looks on their faces were so similar that they could have been mistaken for sisters. Once the girls realized what had happened, they hung their heads, letting out dejected groans as they approached me.

"Another defeat..."

"We lost again..."

"Tina—your trap was a good idea, and you managed to camouflage it well. You pass."

"O-Of course I do."

"Ellie—the speed at which you close distances in close-quarters combat is increasing by the day. You also used a wind spell when you landed, didn't you? It was impressively silent."

"Oh, um... Th-Thank you very much, sir..."

"However, you both need to maintain focus during battle. Also, you haven't broken your bad habit of tracking me with your eyes. It can be difficult to track someone using mana when you're not used to it, but it's an essential skill, so keep trying. Oh, right—I hit you both with water droplets."

I took a handkerchief out from my pocket and used it to wipe the girls' foreheads. *Please hold still... It's harder to dry you off when you're wriggling about like that.*

"Why don't I switch to painless wind shots next time?" I proposed. "You can stay dry that way, and—"

"Absolutely!"

"Not!"

"I-I see. Well then, let's try one more round. But first, it appears to be time for tea."

I had caught sight of Mrs. Walker and several other maids on the other side of the wall that enclosed the indoor training ground. They had recently taken to watching for opportunities to bring us tea, which came as a relief to me.

"Hmph! I've still got plenty of energy!" Tina declared. "And we don't have many days left, so..."

"I-I'm fine too!" Ellie chimed in. "I-I can keep going!"

"I can see that, but it's also important to take short breaks to consider and apply what you've just learned," I replied. "Come along now. Your tea will get cold otherwise. Just look—you can see great big horns growing on Mrs. Walker's head."

"S-Sir!" Tina warned me, struggling to keep a straight face. "If Shelley hears you say that..." Her words trailed off as she burst into laughter.

"A-Allen, sir..." Ellie added nervously. "Grandma has, um, very good hearing..."

And, of course, the moment she said that...

"Mr. Allen. Might I have a word? Lady Tina, Ellie—your tea is ready."

*Oh dear. It appears I've attracted the wrong person's attention.*

As Mrs. Walker approached, I undid the top button of my shirt in preparation for the imminent storm. As usual, she exuded an intimidating air that belied her age.

"I hope you'll show a little restraint this time," I said.

"Of course, sir. I will confront you to the best of my abilities. And I assure you, I *was* showing restraint in the past."

"That certainly isn't what I wanted to hear..."

"I, Shelley Walker, have served the Ducal House of Howard for more than forty years, and I'm not in my dotage yet! Now, have at you!"

*

*That's much better; I knew I couldn't do without hydration after exercising.*

I set my teacup down on its saucer with a *clack*. Across from me, the maids were tending to Mrs. Walker, who was slumped in her chair, exhausted.

"M-Mrs. Walker! A-Are you all right?!"

"Right as rain," she answered, albeit after catching her breath. "I haven't a scratch on me. I'm just a bit...tired. It's been a long time since I seriously exerted myself." She fell silent again, and then she added, "Don't mind me. See to Mr. Allen instead."

"Ah! Ma'am! I-Isn't that stretcher here yet?!"

*Oh, well...*

To be frank, Mrs. Walker had astonished me. I had held back as much as I could, but still. Given the way she moved, plus the speed of and weight behind her strikes, she must have been an incredible fighter in her prime; it was only because I was so used to being on the receiving end of the albatross's swordplay that I had managed to withstand our bout. And Mr. Walker was no slouch either. The whole family was incredible.

*Well now... What have we here? The maids are surrounding me?*

"Mr. Allen, allow me to wipe away your sweat."

"Oh, no faaair! I was going to do that!"

"Allow me to refill your teacup, sir. You're not hungry, are you?"

I shifted my gaze to Mrs. Walker and found that she was wearing a defiant grin. *So, that's how it is. You may have lost, but you won't let me get off unscathed.*

"Hey! You there! Stand aside! *I'll* tend to my tutor!"

"Th-That's right! The only one who should tend to Mr. Allen...is m-me!"

Sure enough, Tina and Ellie were back in action. They had been stiff as boards until a moment ago, unable to process what was happening...but now they pushed aside the deliberately overattentive maids and defensively barred them from reaching me. The two girls were playing right into their hands.

"That strikes me as rather tyrannical."

"It does! Even Ellie's joining innn!"

"Do you want him all to yourselves that badly?"

The smirking maids relentlessly taunted the girls; it appeared that the Howards' maids found more time in their daily routines for antics than I'd imagined. I doubted they really meant any of it, but Tina and Ellie were still too young to realize that. The children were enmeshed in their snare.

"I-I do! He's *my* tutor, after all!"

"N-Not only yours, Lady Tina! Mr. Allen...means a lot to me too..."

"Ooh, reeeally?" the maids chorused in response. "He means *a lot* to you, does he? But can you prove it?"

Tina and Ellie were momentarily speechless. The most they could do was let out furious groans.

*I ought to give them pointers on how to deal with underhanded tactics like— No, that would be a terrible idea. Teaching them things like that would only lead to more anxiety for me. I want these girls to* *grow up to be as noble, honest, beautiful, and straightforward as possible.*

"I-I slept in his bed not too long ago!" Tina blurted out.

"T-Tina?!" I spluttered.

"W-Well, I slept in Mr. Allen's bed too!" Ellie added. "I even got him to comb my hair in the morning!"

"Ellie?" Tina pressed after a moment of silence. "I don't remember that. *Sir*?"

"You were sound asleep, Lady Tina," Ellie answered for me. "And drooling."

Tina was now glaring at me. I forced an awkward laugh and decided it was high time we resumed the day's lesson.

"This conversation isn't over yet, sir. Do my hair too."

"I'll consider it. If the opportunity presents itself."

"Opportunities don't present themselves, sir; you have to make them. I'd like you to do my hair tonight, and every night thereafter."

"A-Allen, sir..." Ellie added. "I'd, um...like you to do mine too..."

"Very well," I said, my response causing both girls to widen their eyes. "But on one condition."

"A condition, sir?"

"D-Do you mean..."

I exchanged a look with Mrs. Walker, who was now receiving the maids' ministrations. *Thank you very much. You've set an excellent example for these girls.*

"If you can land one hit on me—be it a strike or a spell—then I'll comb your hair, let you sleep next to me, or anything else you want. You have my word. Oh, but please keep it within reason."

"I can get him to do my hair morning and evening. And then..."

"I-I'll have him sleep next to me... Also, um..."

The girls were both off in their own worlds. It was something that seemed to be happening with increasing frequency of late, but if it motivated them, I welcomed it.

"Well then. Are you ready?" I asked them. "Try to take a few pointers from how you just saw Mrs. Walker move and use her spells."

"Yes, sir!" the two girls answered.

*

I closed the book I had been reading with a sigh; it contained no information about Frigid Crane either. I then reached for my black tea, which had cooled enough that it now tasted somewhat bitter. I had read nearly a thousand books since my arrival, but I had yet to discover a single one that could teach me anything. After finishing almost every promising work in the archive, I had recently moved on to the collection in Tina's greenhouse room. It was too much trouble to lug books back to my room, so I had taken to spending my nights holed up in the greenhouse alone.

I had made no discoveries that were worthy of mention, but...something was a little odd. I could understand there being a dearth of material about the great spells in texts dating from the War of the Dark Lord—that was the point from which these spells had become legends at best and fairy tales at worst, so official documents were unlikely to attach much importance to accounts of them—but texts dating *before* the war were another story. The great spells were supposed to have been regarded as "fact" in those days—more so than they were now, at any rate—so why, after all my research, had I failed to turn up any new information on them? It was as if someone had thoroughly and deliberately concealed it.

The old royal capital was supposed to have housed a great library. If only it hadn't been lost during the War of the Dark Lord...

At present, only two things about Frigid Crane were clear to me: First, that it was symbolic of the ice element and took the form of a crane with outspread wings when cast. Second, that it had supposedly been used to counteract the great fire spell Flaming Qilin in the decisive battle that had brought an end to the age of strife that once engulfed the entire continent. Legend had it that the two casters had met on the battlefield and that their confrontation had ended in a draw. Neither person's name was preserved.

That was all the information I had.

The situation was much the same with regard to the other great spells. I could not in good faith deny that I was at an impasse. It was possible that the elders of the long-lived races—elves, dwarves, giants, and the like—might know something more, but it would be a struggle to get any information out of them, since the very subject was apparently "taboo."

The only remaining unread document in my possession was that diary, but its cipher had proven to be harder than I'd anticipated. I doubted that I would be able to decrypt it any time soon. I had managed to decipher just a little bit of the first page after my initial attempt, but...the contents launched abruptly into a torrent of complaints, seemingly written by a young woman.

I doubted I would know whether the diary was truly of value until I had read it cover to cover. This was a task I would much rather have foisted on—my apologies, *entrusted to* the professor and his fellow specialists.

Tina's spells were activating without issue, and I hadn't sensed "it" since her outburst. That said, whatever it was definitely existed, and preparing a method to keep it under control was certainly wise. Only a small part of it had escaped during that incident, and that blizzard had been the result. If it were to manifest completely...

I still wasn't certain that it *could* be controlled, but the safety of my student hung in the balance.

Just as I was about to fetch my next book, I heard the door open. "I thought I'd find you here, sir," spoke a familiar voice. "I could see the light from outside."

"Oh? And what do you want me for at this hour of the night?"

Tina stepped into the room, dressed in her nightgown and clutching Anko in her arms; the familiar had recently taken to sleeping with her rather than Ellie. She trotted over to me, pulled up a chair next to mine, and then sunk into it as though it were the most natural thing in the world. Anko curled up on the table.

"I couldn't sleep," Tina answered. "I suppose I'm a little nervous, and I was hoping that my plants would lend me their support."

"I see. Oh, you'll catch a cold dressed like that."

I took the coat I had hung over the back of my chair and draped it around her. It was too large for her, and it must have tickled, because she squirmed so much she appeared to be swimming.

"Thank you very much. Um...sir?"

"Yes?"

Tina paused for a beat before continuing. "If we fail tomorrow, does that mean we won't get to go to the royal capital?"

"Well...I suppose it is possible, depending on the outcome. Still, I'm confident that it won't come to that. Even if the duke does by some chance forbid you to go, there's no need to worry—I'll talk him round. You and Ellie will be fine."

"Do you really mean that?"

"I do."

"Does that mean you believe in me—in us?"

"Of course it does. I'm your tutor, after all, and what kind of tutor doesn't have faith in his students?"

"I'm glad," she replied after a moment. "So glad..."

She rested her small head on my shoulder. That would ordinarily be my cue to tease her a little, but I supposed she couldn't help it that day. If my shoulder could do anything to relieve her tension, she was welcome to it.

"Would you mind my telling you something, sir? It won't take long."

"Not unless you mind my hearing it."

"I don't mind, sir. You're the only one I'd tell."

"Thank you very much. I'm honored."

Tina raised her head to meet my gaze. She was just a little teary-eyed, and she looked somewhat bashful as she began to speak.

"It's about my mother."

*

I think I've already told you that my mother passed away when I was very young. Father tells me she fell ill from unknown causes after I was born. She was in excellent health before then—I'm told that she'd never been ill a day in her life—but...

In my memories, mother is always in bed, with a hefty book in her hands and several more piled on her bedside table. Tee hee. Just like you are now, sir.

I loved having mother read to me, whether from picture books or grown-up ones, and I remember that I was always begging her to read me more. I just wanted to talk to her. My favorites, even though they frightened me, were the stories of the great heroes—and the great spells they wielded.

There was Blazing Qilin, with which an imperial countess was said to have reduced the eastern capital to ashes; Frigid Crane, which froze battlefields solid alongside the Lady of Ice, a hero of the kingdom; Tempest Kingfisher, which traveled the world with its wielder and healed the scars left after the heroes' passing...

Those were the only three mother told me about, but... Ever since I can remember, I've been unable to cast spells—I've been held in contempt and called "the Howards' cursed child." I think my memories of mother reading me those stories are the reason I never lost hope.

People may mock me for it, but I believe that the great spells do exist. That's why I want to go to the royal capital and the Royal Academy, even if my father disapproves. Those stories are mementos of my mother; I want to prove that they're true.

...You're the first person I've told this to, sir. Thank you for listening to me.

*

*I see...*

"Huh? S-Sir?"

It seemed that Tina's mother had been even more impressive than I'd given her credit for. I seemed to recall hearing that she and the duke had met at the Royal Academy. Still, I wished that I could have met her in person. How in the world had she collected stories about the great spells—stories that couldn't be found even in the Royal Library? And why hadn't she left them behind her?

"S-Sir, um..."

Were they written in that diary? No, that wouldn't make sense. It was much too old.

I had found a number of bookmarks in the pages of volumes Tina's mother had left behind. Judging by their locations, it was just possible...that she had known the cause of her beloved daughter's magical impairment.

"S-Sir!"

I looked curiously at Tina. Her gaze was downcast and she was blushing furiously, as though she were finding something difficult to bear.

*What have we here?*

I checked the position of my right hand to discover that I had been rubbing her head without realizing it. I withdrew my hand immediately, conscious that I had succumbed to my bad habit once again.

"Ah..."

"Pardon me; I must have startled you. I rubbed your head without thinking."

"Y-You did startle me," Tina stammered, her voice beginning to dwindle, "but...I didn't mind it. In fact...you could keep..."

"That was a fascinating story, Tina. Your mother must have truly loved you."

"Hmph. I wouldn't know. I mean, I was so young."

"What? Oh, I see. You haven't realized. Would you take a look at this?"

I picked up one of the books arranged beside the table and showed a bookmarked page to the nonplussed girl sitting beside me. The page contained the basic formula for an ice spell, above which were meticulous notes in a woman's hand.

"This is... Sir, do you think...?"

"I've had the pleasure of reading a fair number of the books here in these past three months."

"You call that 'a fair number'? I bet it would take an ordinary person a decade to read as much as you have since you arrived."

"Flattery won't earn you any head pats."

"I'm being serious. Jeez."

"A number of the books I've read contain bookmarks, and the marked pages have one thing in common—they all concern the basic elements of ice magic. Every marked book also has the same personal bookplate on the final page. I'm sorry to say that there were no traces of anyone having read them before I did. I suspect she had no opportunity to relay the details before she..." I allowed my words to trail off. "Were the books in this room taken from the archive, by any chance?"

"Yes, they were. But what does that—"

"I don't know your mother personally, but I can tell that she must have been concerned about how her children would fare after her passing. The notes she left in these books make that much obvious." I chuckled. "To tell the truth, the ice spells I've taught you came from these books, albeit with some improvements of my own. In other words—"

Tina threw her arms around me, and I felt something warm dripping onto my chest. I gently patted her back. We must have stayed like that for some time before Tina raised her head, looked at me, and said, "Sir, I'm going to win tomorrow. I'm going to win and go to the royal capital and then to the Royal Academy."

"That's the spirit. Don't worry—I guarantee that you and Ellie can do it. If you're ever feeling nervous, then..."

"Then what, sir?"

"Then remember our secret."

"I will."

Later, while I was escorting Tina to her room, we ran into Ellie. She didn't so much as hesitate to try to cast a spell. I stopped and attempted to pacify her, with some success...but then Tina started goading her on, spurring Ellie to try once again. We repeated the whole cycle several times over. They *did* remember that their final exam was the next day, didn't they?

*How strange... I thought I'd arranged their education so that they wouldn't turn out like this. Oh well. The best-laid plans often go awry, especially when girls are concerned.*

*

The next morning was sunny for a change. I was glad for a glimpse of the sun; thick clouds had been obscuring it for some time. It seemed that I did prefer warm weather after all.

After my regular morning practice, I toweled myself off and headed to breakfast. On my way, I greeted the maids and apprentice butlers whom I had come to know and like over the past three months. It pained me to think that I would soon be saying goodbye to these people as well.

Still...I wondered why some of them had jokingly taken to calling me "the future master of the house." I seemed to recall the Leinster maids making similar remarks when I'd been abducted and forced to spend the summer on the Leinster estate—in fact, I half-suspected that they had dedicated their lives to having fun at our expense. My assumption had been that the Howard servants were quite sober in comparison.

The pleasant aroma of soup greeted me as I reached the dining hall. The meal, as usual, was simple yet delicious. I'd gotten them to teach me the recipe, and I made a mental note that I ought to try making it for myself sometime.

"Good morning, Mr. Allen," Mr. Walker greeted me near the entrance.

"And to you, Mr. Walker. What of Duke Walter?"

"He says that he 'will not fraternize with the enemy who aims to steal his daughter away until all is said and done.'"

"Oh, I see. In that case, may I ask you to deliver a message?"

"Yes, sir. By all means."

"Tell him, 'Your daughter shall be mine.'"

"Very well, sir. Mr. Allen?"

"Yes?"

"Might I convince you to take Ellie?"

I almost goggled at the head butler in spite of myself. Where in the world had that come from? This *was* the same man who had been challenging me to battles alongside his wife until just recently, wasn't it?

"Merely a joke, sir."

"Oh. Y-Yes, of course." I forced a laugh. "That's just like you, Mr. Walker; I couldn't help but wonder what you meant for a moment there."

"I'll need you to defeat me first, at the very least."

"Huh? Wh-What do you mean by—"

The door slammed open, cutting off my question, and a pair of voices greeted me as energetically as ever.

"Oh, sir! Jeez! Didn't I tell you to wait for us?!"

"Good morning, Allen, sir."

Tina and Ellie approached me, looking refreshed. Tina wore the same deep blue dress I had first seen her in and had a pure white ribbon in her hair. Ellie was dressed in her usual maid's uniform; she apparently intended to take the test as normal.

*Good. They should have no trouble now.*

"Good morning," I greeted them. "I take it you're both fully prepared?"

"Yes, sir!" came two replies.

"Excellent. But don't forget to eat a proper breakfast first."

"We won't."

I sat down, and the girls took the seats on either side of me. Meals were always like this lately. The nearby maids smirked, and the apprentice butlers and gardeners glared at me as though I had killed their parents. I hadn't made my peace with the situation, but I decided to accept it without complaint.

It was then that I felt a tug on my left sleeve.

"Allen, sir."

"Yes?"

"Do you like the soup?"

"It's delicious," I answered after a brief pause to consider.

Ellie giggled. "I'm glad. I'm the one who made it today. I just *had* to cook for you, sir."

"Then you're a good cook on top of everything else, Ellie. That's splendid."

"Y-Yessir! Th-Thank you very much, shir..." The maid stared at me and fidgeted. "S-So, um, I mean... If you let me stay with you, I'm sure I'd... Well, I'd cause you lots of trouble, but...but I..."

She was simply ador— *Ow. That's cold.* Ice crystals fluttered around us like blossoms, and someone pinched my right hand. *Say no to violence!*

"Sir, we're in the middle of a meal," Tina reprimanded me. "Ellie, that was improper of you as well. Our final exam is today; do you think we have time to waste on merrymaking? I certainly don't."

"I-I'm sorry."

"As long as you understand. By the way, sir..."

"Yes?"

After a moment of silence, Tina said, "I suppose you think a girl ought to know how to cook."

"No, not especially."

"Y-You mean it, sir?!" she asked, all of a sudden eagerly leaning forward.

"L-Lady Tina! We're in the middle of breakfast!"

This time, Ellie was the one admonishing Tina, a hint of anxiety in her eyes. Her Highness, however, refused to stop.

"Do you really, truly mean it, sir?!"

"I never lie. I'm sorry to say that, of the few girls in my social orbit, just about the only one who knows how to cook...is Ellie."

Upon hearing this, Ellie looked at me with wide eyes.

Tina groaned. "Th-That makes me feel a bit conflicted in its own right... Maybe I'd better learn to cook after all..."

"Y-You're fine just the way you are, Lady Tina!" Ellie interjected. "Um, I mean, cooking is my job. Sewing and cleaning too!"

"You're only saying that to make yourself look better, aren't you?" Tina asked her maid pointedly. "Since when have you been such a crafty little schemer?"

"G-Grandma told me that 'if you can win over a gentleman's stomach, you'll most likely crush the competition'!"

That took Tina aback for a moment. "How could Shelley...?" she murmured. "And why won't anyone else teach me to cook either? Do you all hate me? Is that it?"

The onlookers' gazes shifted nervously. Even Mr. Walker shook his head with a wry smile.

*I see...*

It was then that Mrs. Walker entered. “My lady! What is the meaning of this unbecoming behavior?!” she exclaimed. “I could hear you out in the hallway! Sitting next to Mr. Allen is no excuse to forget that you are a daughter of the House of Howard.”

The scene made it obvious whose granddaughter Ellie was.

“Shelley,” Tina addressed the head maid with a smile, rising to her feet after a brief silence.

“Wh-What is it, my lady?”

Tina waited another moment before making her demand. “Teach me to cook too.”

“My humble apologies; I’ve just remembered that I’ve neglected absolutely all of my duties. Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

The Howards’ head maid moved like a shot. She attempted to flee so quickly that I wondered if she might be a little *too* spry for her age. Nevertheless, creepers of ice instantly restrained her, causing a stir to run through the onlookers.

“Magnificently done,” Mr. Walker praised Tina’s handiwork.

Mrs. Walker appeared overcome with emotion. “My lady...” she said. “I never dreamed that you had come so far...”

“Ellie, it looks as though you’d better not activate that spell,” I warned the maid beside me.

“Y-Yessir.”

Ellie obediently abandoned the spell she had been preparing. I doubted that anyone aside from myself and Mr. Walker had noticed it. As I had already noted during our practice sessions, Ellie’s spells were extremely silent prior to activation; by the time she grew up, she would be able to fire them off without anyone being able to see them coming. It was a little pleasing to see that her style somewhat resembled my own.

As I reflected on Ellie’s talents, Tina continued her threats—*ahem, demands*—from her position beside me. “Now, Shelley—promise to teach me how to cook,” she said.

“Th-That... That is the one request I cannot grant...not even for you, my lady!”

“Oh, is that so?” Tina answered after a tense pause.

“M-My lady!” Genuine panic entered Mrs. Walker’s voice—a rare occurrence. “C-Casting a spell of that magnitude here would be...!”

The nearby maids each readied defensive spells, but none of them made any move to leave.

*...Are you certain you're not enjoying this? Oh, they're using any apprentice butlers who failed to escape in time as shields. Perhaps that could be the start of a romantic— No? I see. This has been a somewhat unpleasant display of the power dynamics between the sexes.*

I snapped my fingers, collapsing the advanced spell Tina had been constructing and dispelling the vines of ice, at which point Mrs. Walker ran off as fast as her legs would carry her. *Could she be lying about her age after— Oh, this vegetable soup certainly is delicious.*

Tina was beside me, glaring resentfully. "Sir, why did you get in my way? What will you do if my inability to cook leaves me unable to find a husband? Are you planning to take responsibility for that outcome?"

"Please don't bring up such serious subjects so casually. Now, say 'aah.'"

"Huh? Aah..."

I brought a spoon to Tina's mouth. At that moment, I knew just how a mother bird felt feeding her chicks.

The maid on the other side of me leapt to her feet with a wordless scream.

"Do you like it?" I asked Tina.

"It's delicious," she admitted after a pause, "but also frustrating. I could never make soup as good as this."

"That's because you haven't devoted any time to cooking. But..." I smiled at the sulking girl. *Ellie, there's no need to panic.* "All that means is that you can still learn, like how you learned magic. Am I wrong?"

"Like with magic, sir?"

"That's right."

Tina giggled. "I was a bit mean to Shelley. I'm told that students take after their teachers, so that's your fault, sir. May I ask you to take responsibility for that too?"

"Here, Ellie. Say 'aah.'"

"Huh? Oh, uh, um... A-Aah."

I fed a spoonful of soup to the maid, who was struggling to keep up with the situation. *I knew she was a nice girl...* I started to muse, but I was pulled from my thoughts by a blast of cold air and a frustrated outburst.

"You're always, always, *always* like this, sir! Jeez! Jeez, I say! Jeez!"

"I can't help it, Tina—your and Ellie's reactions are just so fun—uh, charming. Please forgive me. I can see that there's nothing the matter with either of you."

"I-If you think I'll stop being upset just because you called me 'charming,' well...I will. I'm totally fine; that long talk we had yesterday really lifted my spirits!"

"Ch-Char-Charming... I'm charming..."

"Come back to us, Ellie," I said.

"Y-Yessir!" the maid hastily replied. "I-I'm fine. I went over everything with Lady Tina this morning."

"Well done. I'm impressed."

Ellie let out a startled little cry as I rubbed her head.

"Sir," Tina complained after a moment, "you always give Ellie special— Ah."

I rubbed her head as well, running my fingers along her ribbon as I did so.

*I'm sure they'll be fine. If the duke isn't satisfied with these girls now...then he never had any intention of allowing them to go to the academy. Be that as it may, I'm going to make certain they win. I hope that they never have to use this, but my father taught me that "preparation is the most important part of any undertaking." So, I'll just—*

"Sir."

"Allen, sir."

Two slightly anxious faces met my eyes. I flashed them a smile.

"Don't worry. You're going to win today."

*

After breakfast, I escorted the girls to their final exam.

Thanks to Tina's insistence that "this is an emergency stress-relief measure!" and Ellie's stammered agreement, the two of them were clinging to my arms. If it would do even a little to help them relax, I wouldn't complain that day.

*Now, Anko, why are you on my head and not my shoulder? It makes it easier for you to see? Well, I suppose I can't argue with that.*

Our group of three humans and one familiar headed past the main house and detached building to the indoor training ground. It was plain to look at, as one might expect from the Howards with their emphasis on hardy simplicity, but the thickness of its pillars and the outer wall that encircled it spoke to the intensity of the training that took place within.

We entered the circular structure and found Mrs. Walker waiting for us, holding a cloth-wrapped object. A plethora of maids accompanied her. A large man was already standing in the center of the training ground with his arms crossed and his back to the entrance; his hair was the same pale, bluish color as Tina's. Mr. Walker, the apprentice butlers, and the gardeners were gathered on the opposite side of the arena.

*I see... The household is divided into those in favor and those opposed. I'm sure Mr. Walker followed the dictates of loyalty.*

Mrs. Walker stopped me not long after we had arrived, still clutching the cloth-wrapped object in both hands. "This way, Mr. Allen. You're not to interfere," she said. "Lady Tina, Ellie."

"Right!" Both girls nodded and let go of my arms.

*Oh, that's right—I almost forgot something important.* "Mrs. Walker, would you provide Tina with a training wand?" I asked.

"That won't be necessary," Mrs. Walker replied. "Lady Tina, this is for you."

With that, Mrs. Walker removed the cloth and handed Tina a rod topped with a beautiful azure crystal. I could sense powerful mana resembling Tina's emanating from the rod itself.

"Sh-Shelley..." Tina stammered. "Th-This is..."

"This rod belonged to the mistress—to Duchess Rosa. She left it in my keeping and wished me to pass it on to you when you learned magic. Please pardon me...for not delivering it to you until today."

"Mother's! Thank you. I've nothing to fear now!" Tina declared, her eyes now ignited with fighting spirit.

Mrs. Walker started sobbing soon after handing over the rod—this whole exchange must have been hard on her as well. Ellie grasped her weeping grandmother by the hand in an attempt to comfort her.

*Ah, how wonderful.*

"All right!" Tina exclaimed. "Let's go, Ellie! Watch us, won't you, sir?"

"Yes, Lady Tina!" Ellie responded. "We'll hit this man with everything Mr. Allen taught us!"

"Good luck, you two!" I told them.

"Yes, sir!"

And with that, both girls stepped forward into the circle of the inner walls.

*I was right; Rosa had never stopped worrying about the daughters she would leave behind. But wait...* I thought as I lowered myself into one of the spectator seats arranged along the outer rim of the arena. *In that case, what about Ellie's parents?*

Mrs. Walker took the seat next to mine and, without missing a beat, addressed the very question on my mind. "I suppose you're wondering why I didn't give anything to Ellie, sir," she said.

"To be honest, I am."

"Because," she answered after a longer pause, "those children left nothing behind. Nothing but Ellie."

"What do you mean?"

She turned her attention to the arena. "It's beginning."

The two girls confronted the large man standing with his back to them in the center of the training ground. Between them, Mr. Walker, who was acting as judge, indicated the man with a hand gesture.

"Lady Tina, Ellie, this gentleman will be your opponent today. Circumstances compel him to conceal his face and voice, but...he is every bit the champion that the master is."

"Please face us," Tina addressed the man, raising her voice. "Our exam can't begin like this."

"I am about to test you. If you are unable to convince me, Duke Howard will not permit you to apply to the Royal Academy. Hold nothing back; challenge me with all your body and soul!"

The man turned around. A silver mask concealed his face, and he was magically altering his voice. Still, given his build and mana...

*I see. He did say that he had "one condition."*

Tina seemed to have realized as well. "You're... I understand!

I'll *make* you acknowledge me, and I won't hold back!" she declared.

"I-I'll do my best!" Ellie chimed in.

"Step back to your lines."

At Mr. Walker's direction, both sides withdrew to lines drawn on the ground on their respective sides of the arena.

"Now...begin!" Mr. Walker shouted, shooting his arm up into the air.

*At last, the main event!*

*

The girls readied themselves, Ellie taking up a position as the vanguard with Tina supporting her from behind. Meanwhile, the man in the silver mask remained standing with his arms folded, not moving a muscle. He must have been trying to tell them to make the opening move—to show him what they were capable of. I thought that was a poor move.

Ellie shot forward and tested him with a knife hand strike by way of greeting.

The masked man let out an exclamation of approbation. "Impressive. But too slow!" He evaded each blow with ease, moving no more than he absolutely needed to. It was clear to see that he was a close-quarters fighter, and he appeared to be quite confident in his mastery of hand-to-hand combat...which made him all the easier to deceive.

The man seized Ellie's right wrist and tossed her into the air. "You're helpless in midair," he declared. "Now, withstand this!"

He tried to deploy an ice spell, but no sooner had he begun than his legs sunk into the ground and froze solid, trapping him in place.

"Water, earth, and...ice?!" he exclaimed in consternation. "Wh-When did she—"

"I don't think you can afford to get distracted."

The man's attention snapped to Tina, who deployed countless ice shots around her simultaneously and then loosed them! She hadn't managed to control that many during practice; her rod must have been made for an ice spellcaster.

I suspected that, beneath his mask, the man's expression was twisted in shock...but he must have been delighted too. After all, his dear daughter, who had so recently lacked any magical ability whatsoever, was now displaying a level of technical skill far beyond the average sorcerer.

A white cloud obscured my view as one ice shot after another struck home. A cheer went up from the onlookers; they were apparently surprised that the girls had made so much progress.

"Mr. Allen." Mrs. Walker addressed me from her seat, her gaze still fixed on the arena. She spoke in a tone that I had never heard from her before. "Please, don't look away, but listen. I will tell you about Ellie's parents and about Duchess Rosa."

I'd suspected as much. There were things I needed to ask her as well.

In the arena, Ellie and Tina were diligently weaving spells without breaking formation. But whatever happened, it would take more than that for them to finish this fight.

"I believe Ellie has told you something about them herself," Mrs. Walker continued, "but I've never spoken of this to her or to Lady Tina."

"Then why tell me?" I asked after a brief silence.

The man in the silver mask suddenly came back into view, having torn through the field of white. He was unsurprisingly unscathed—it appeared that he had struck every shot out of the air. Tina intercepted him with vines of ice, aiming to halt his advance, but...

"That won't work!"

The man was ripping through one creeper after another. He was a straightforward close-quarters-combat specialist, which meant that the girls' next move would be—

Tina continued weaving spells as Ellie scooped her up in her arms and fell back.

"You'll have to do more than run away!" the masked man called out. He continued his pursuit, but then he abruptly stopped short. "Hmph. A trap to seal my vision, I take it." After a pause, he added, "Magic. Surely she can't have mastered that much."

*What a shame. If you'd taken one more step forward, the girls would have gained a sudden advantage... I'm guessing that's what you're thinking.*

The man in the silver mask inadvertently stepped forward, pushed by a sudden gust from behind. Darkness coiled around his body, hindering his movements and depriving him of his vision.

He let out a loud grunt of shock. “H-How?! Why couldn’t I detect your spell?!”

*Yes, Ellie has a talent for that. She also has far more mana than I do. That girl will no doubt become a force to be reckoned with.*

“Her parents were similarly gifted,” Mrs. Walker began to explain, almost as if she were talking to herself. There was a deep sorrow in her eyes. “They were able to cast spells quickly and without a sound, and, much like Ellie, they were wholehearted in everything they did. But…it was that earnestness that claimed their lives. They escaped the royal capital once, you know—to leave Ellie with us. Then, they went back there…and never returned. They were convinced they would make it back again, so they left nothing for Ellie. Even their bodies were incinerated, like all the others back then. Not even their ashes remained.”

Mrs. Walker paused for a moment before she continued. “As much as ‘a physician’s duty’ has a nice ring to it, Graham and I never cared much about it; instead, we had wanted them to flee. The deaths of our daughter and a man we thought of as a son were tough to bear.” She fell silent again, and then she added, “It was shortly after that Duchess Rosa passed away.”

Ellie unleashed multiple fire tornadoes to overwhelm the ensnared man.

“Magnificent,” the man muttered as the flames engulfed him. “So she’s mastered fire, water, wind, earth, darkness, and ice. I never dreamed…”

*I’d say the real battle begins now.*

“Mr. Allen,” Mrs. Walker resumed, “how much do you know about Duchess Rosa?”

“Only the basic facts, but I do have several questions about her.”

“About the great spells, sir?”

“How do you know that?!”

I turned to stare at Mrs. Walker in spite of myself when a thunderous roar came from the arena. I hurriedly turned back to look and saw that a massive block of ice had materialized in front of the masked man, freezing the surrounding area.

“I thought so,” Mrs. Walker said. “Something about you reminds me of my mistress, sir. She was conducting her own research into the great spells as well. I have no way of knowing how much progress she made, but…”

"Do you know why she was researching them?"

"I asked, but she only laughed and dodged the question. Even when pressed for an answer, the most she would tell me was that she was doing it for her little girl."

Myriad thoughts flashed through my mind. *Does that mean Tina's mother foresaw that her daughter would be involved with the great spells in some way? How?*

"Let's focus on the competition for now," I eventually said, pulling myself out of my own head. "It seems as though the waiting and watching is over."

"Your ability is impressive!" the man in the silver mask bellowed. "But can you withstand this?!"

He summoned two massive icicles at once, their scale leaving no doubt that he had cast an advanced spell. Stopping the attack head-on would be somewhat of a tall order for the girls—although in a few more years, it would be no cause for concern.

Ellie was standing in front of Tina and weaving more than ten intermediate fire spells, just as I had taught her. Most current students at the Royal Academy and University would be astonished to learn that she was just fourteen and not even attending school; formulating even two or three spells simultaneously would ordinarily be cause for praise.

However...the difference between the spells would be unfortunately difficult to overcome.

Over the past three months, I had thoroughly drilled Ellie in intermediate magic, and I was confident that she had reached a level that could withstand real combat with every element except lightning and light, with which she still struggled. But that approach had also meant neglecting the powerful advanced spells that could have served as her ace in the hole. The same went for Tina, with whom I'd had to prioritize control above all else. Intermediate spells would be more than enough to earn them admission to the Royal Academy, but...

Both girls glanced at me, broad smiles on their faces.

*Of course. I almost forgot. Who will believe in them if not me?*

"Tina! Ellie! You can do it!" I shouted. It was frustrating that I was forbidden from giving them directions, but no one had told me not to cheer them on.

No sooner had Ellie heard my voice than she doubled the number of spells she was weaving. Then, she began firing one after another with a rapidity that would be inconceivable using conventional magic.

"That won't save you!" the man in the silver mask roared as he activated his spell. "This is the advanced ice spell Twin Icicle Pillars! Block it if you can!"

The two gargantuan icicles flew toward the girls. Ellie's spells burst against them one after another in an effort to impede their progress...but that wouldn't be enough to stop them. That was when Tina swung her rod and whispered:

"Twin Icicle Pillars."

Two slightly smaller icicles emerged from beneath the oncoming spell, intercepting it from an unexpected angle. The two advanced spells canceled each other out, shattering to dust and scattering shards of ice across the whole arena. Shouts and screams rose from the spectators. I decided to eliminate any dangerous fragments that looked as though they might reach the maids by intercepting them with fire spells.

I hadn't taught Tina that spell—but then again, she was an avid reader too. I was happy to see that she had made use of the method that had been described in that book, which allowed for activating ice spells from below the ground.

Tina waved her rod again, and its jeweled tip let off a beautiful glow.

"Swift Ice Lances."

Innumerable ice spears materialized, encircling the masked man and leaving him with no escape as they assaulted him all at once.

Mrs. Walker let out an exclamation of astonishment. "How can she activate offensive spells like that?! She did the same with that advanced spell!"

If even someone as skilled as her was shocked, then the girls' opponent must have been all the more so—or perhaps he was smiling beneath his silver mask.

In conventional magic, offensive spells were generally deployed and activated forward; the very concept of an attack from all sides was almost unheard of. Even combining spells of different elements, as Ellie had done when attempting to freeze the man's legs in place using water and earth magic, was the province of experienced fighters. I suspected that was a drawback of the current state of magic—anyone could cast spells, but their application and development was limited. Painfully few people even made improvements to their spell formulae. Take a spell that launches a firebolt straight ahead, for instance—it was true that anyone could cast it if they memorized the formula and possessed enough mana...but that was all they could do. Once you knew what to expect, it was possible to counteract it, some variation in power notwithstanding.

I had started the girls' education by teaching them existing spells, but I then moved on to formulae I had rewritten to increase the amount of "blank space." And as a result...

The man in the silver mask grunted with exertion and retreated a few steps as he smashed the ice spears speeding toward him with skilled punches. How was he able to intercept spells with his bare hands?! His mastery of unarmed combat was astounding. And was that azure mana covering his fists?

*I see. So, that's the secret of the Howards I've read so much about—the Azure Fists.*

The underlying principle appeared similar to the Leinsters' Scarlet Sword. Perhaps the secret arts of the Four Great Dukedoms all stemmed from the same source. It was supposedly forbidden to teach or display them outside of the family, so few people had ever seen them. Considered in that light, I supposed I was fortunate to have been given the opportunity to observe two of the four. Of course, that was probably just a coincidence.

*Still, I bet I could imitate this. I'd love to try teaching it to Ellie if the duke would allow it.*

Tina was every bit the typical rear-line fighter she appeared to be, so close-quarters combat techniques beyond basic self-defense would potentially serve only as a hindrance to her. That said, her curiosity was boundless, so...

*Wait, what am I thinking?! I'm only their private tutor until they enter the Royal Academy—anything after that is still up in the air.*

Such was my contract, and I had no intention of prolonging it. I could already hear the albatross lecturing me. *"You're too nice for your own good. If you think that you can save absolutely everyone then you're conceited. So just focus on the people right in front of you."*

*Yes, I know... I really do. These girls are good kids—very good kids—and they'll grow up just fine without my help.*

The girls had finally driven the masked man back against the wall. Tina was still maintaining her spell while Ellie wove intermediate spells to block his escape.

*She's making those visible on purpose; she's actually betting on something el— Oh, her fists are red. I can't believe she's already attempting what I wanted to experiment with. Should I call it the "Scarlet Fists"? Still, I'm impressed. It might not take her long to surpass me.*

Tina thrust her rod forward and declared, "This battle is over! I take it you'll acknowledge our right to apply to the Royal Academy now?"

"Uh, um..." Ellie stammered. "Any further resistance is p-pointless! Please surrender unconditionally at once!"

I would need to lecture Ellie later. She seemed to have acquired a questionable vocabulary, perhaps due to the influence of her rambunctious young mistress.

"I recognize that rod," the masked man muttered to himself. "Of course. So, Shelley was still holding on to it..." He allowed his words to trail off and then shouted, "In that case, I can't hold back either! That's not what the owner of that rod would want!"

He brought his fists together with an audible *crash* and started shaping incredibly potent mana. He wasn't even trying to hide his spell formula—he must have wanted the girls to see it.

Ellie took a step forward in an attempt to close distance, but Tina shot her a glance to stop her. The two of them were planning to confront the man's full power. I wondered who they got that from.

"Oh no! Everyone, evacuate!" Mrs. Walker shouted to the maids, a note of urgency in her voice. "That spell is no laughing matter!"

"Mr. Walker!" I alerted the head butler. "You'll be caught in it where you're standing!"

"But the contest hasn't been settled," he protested.

"Don't worry. Mrs. Walker, please look after Anko."

"Mr. Allen?!"

I placed Anko, who had been sitting on my head, in Mrs. Walker's care and descended into the arena with a short grunt of exertion. I approached the hesitating head butler and initiated a whispered conversation.

"I'll take your place as judge. I'm sure he won't complain after all he's seen—especially considering that he's so obviously trying to lose. Of course, holding back doesn't appear to be his strong suit."

"You do realize it will be dangerous, don't you, sir?" Mr.

Walker whispered back after a pause.

"I'm used to it, for better or worse."

A cold gust blew through the arena, bringing snow with it. What followed was a bestial howl—inaudible to the ear but still clearly perceptible—and a potent wave of mana. The entire training ground was becoming blanketed in white as the man in the silver mask dispassionately stated:

"Foolish girls. Didn't your instructor teach you to pressure your opponent when they show you an opening?"

"Th-This is..." Tina faltered. "B-But I—we—aren't going to lose! We're going to win and go to the Royal Academy! Oh, and don't make fun of our teacher!"

Ellie groaned and stammered, "H-How are we supposed to stop *this*? But...! But Lady Tina and I won't lose. After all, we're Mr. Allen's students!"

Tina and Ellie trembled as a colossal ice wolf started taking shape, shrouded in pure white snow. This was the pride of the Ducal House of Howard—the supreme spell Blizzard Wolf. As the white beast charged forward, it left nothing but a world of snow and ice in its wake. The masked man was reining it in, but its presence was still overwhelming.

"Please hurry," I pressed Mr. Walker again in a whisper. "Gather up all the military ice-resistant barriers that the professor sent and erect them outside. If worse comes to worst, I'll escape with the girls. I'm counting on you."

After a moment of silence, Mr. Walker whispered back, "My humble apologies. They are in your hands."

"Graham!" Mrs. Walker called out as her husband started crossing the inner wall. "Graham, why are you...?"

"I will entrust everything to Mr. Allen."

"I see. Very well." She went quiet, and then she added, "This is also Duchess Rosa's..."

The spectators completed their evacuation, with Mr. and Mrs. Walker being the last to leave. The girls were startled by my sudden appearance, and I winked at them as if to say, *"You've done a great job so far."*

*Now, I have a question for this gentleman...*

"Before the final clash, would you tell me just one thing?" I asked.

"What?" the masked man responded.

"Why is Duke Walter so set against allowing these two to go to the Royal Academy? Are they still not strong enough to satisfy him?"

The question hung in the air for a long moment before the man answered, "I doubt he feels that way."

"Then why?"

"...I cannot say. Talk can wait until we've settled this!"

At those words, the man's Blizzard Wolf gave another inaudible howl.

*Here it comes!*

"Tina, Ellie," I said.

"We'll be fine, sir. Please watch us!"

"W-We won't lose!"

The girls' responses were reassuring. *In that case, I'll watch this play out*, I thought as I distanced myself from the trio.

"Prepare yourselves."

In an instant, the man in the silver mask unleashed his Blizzard Wolf. Tina and Ellie bombarded it with spells, but...every single one of them was freezing solid—even the fire spells.

"Once it begins its charge, it stops for nothing!" the man declared. "Especially not for ordinary magic!"

"I-In that case...!" Tina touched the ferrule of her rod to the ground and cast Twin Icicle Pillars over and over. They all found their target, striking the Blizzard Wolf...and vanished.

"It's totally immune to ice magic. If you want to contend with it, you'd better unleash a supreme spell of your own."

Tina gritted her teeth. Ellie, in contrast, ran forward to strike the main body of the spell directly. She thrust a bright red fist at the wolf—and then immediately retreated. The mana in her hand had vanished.

"A wise choice," the masked man remarked. "Blizzard Wolf transforms the area around it into a freezing hellscape. A reckless charge toward it would be the last move you ever make."

The girls let out exclamations of shock and alarm as panic began to show on their faces. They had been trying all sorts of spells as they retreated, but they had yet to find one that had any effect.

*What will you do now?*

All of a sudden, Tina and Ellie shouted an urgent warning.

"Sir! You're in danger!"

"Allen, sir! Look out! Please run!"

The wolf was charging toward me, ignoring the girls entirely. Had it changed targets? But why would it? Even a supreme spell was still just a spell—it went where its caster intended it to. And this spell had been cast by a master. A misfire was inconceivable.

"No!" Tina and Ellie screamed again.

*Whoops. I shouldn't drag this out any longer; the girls will worry.*

"Thank you," I told them, "but don't worry; I'm used to this."

An instant before the wolf's fangs would have impaled me, I retreated to where the girls were standing while nullifying its freezing aura. At the same time, I pinned its paws to the ground with spears of dark magic, which was ordinarily impervious to freezing.

*Huh? This shouldn't be this effective. It feels like...*

I looked at the man in the silver mask, who then returned a slight nod.

"Tina, Ellie," I called to the stunned girls.

"Y-Yes, sir!" they answered.

"You've done well so far—I really mean that. But it's impossible to stop a supreme spell with ordinary magic."

"L-Liar!" Tina objected. "I mean, you're stopping one right now!"

"Th-That's amazing, Allen, sir!" Ellie added.

"Let's just leave it at that," I said after a brief pause. "That said, if we're going to fight, what do you say we give our opponent a surprise and win? Tina."

"Yes, sir!"

"Were you able to see the formula to cast Blizzard Wolf?"

"I was, but..."

"Well then, you won't have time to practice, but I suggest you take this opportunity to try it. Ellie."

"Y-Yessir!"

"Please help Tina. You have better control than she does."

"A-All right." Ellie was noticeably startled, while Tina looked indignant.

"Of course, everything depends on Tina's memory," I added.

"I-I know that," Tina said as she began deploying the formula to cast Blizzard Wolf. After a brief silence, she added, "Stupid meanie."

It was rarely practical to deploy such a large spell formula in midair because doing so normally increased the risk of enemy interference. That, however, was the least of the girls' concerns as they struggled frantically to draw the formula.

"Um... I think it went..."

"Lady Tina, y-you can shorten this bit. See?"

"Oh, you're right."

*Wonderful. What beautiful cooperation. But...*

"You're too slow," the masked man declared. "It's time I put an end to this."

The spears of darkness that had been restraining the Blizzard Wolf disintegrated. Even dark magic, which was far removed from the concept of "freezing," was meaningless in the face of a supreme spell. But what exactly had just frozen? That was one of the mysteries of magic, in my opinion.

At almost the same time, two lively shouts rang out.

"Don't worry!"

"W-We managed it somehow!"

The spell formula for Blizzard Wolf that the girls had constructed together activated. Their spell collided with the oncoming wolf, covering even more of the surrounding area in white. And yet...

"W-We're being driven back?" Tina shouted. "Wh-Why?!"

Ellie babbled incoherently.

Tina and Ellie's spell was being slowly but steadily overwhelmed. I was impressed that they had managed to cast a supreme spell for the first time in such desperate circumstances, especially after having seen it only once. It was so unbelievable that it reminded me of a certain spoiled noblewoman I knew well. Nevertheless, their spell was rough and incomplete.

*I suppose this is their limit. I'd hate for them to get hurt, so—*

Just as I was about to step forward, the girls grasped me by the hands.

"Not yet, sir," Tina said. "This isn't over! We can keep going!"

"Allen, sir, do you mind if I hold your hand?" Ellie added. "I'm sure I can keep going if I do."

"But..." I went to protest, but there was clear determination in their eyes. *I suppose I have no choice. I am their tutor, after all.* I squeezed their hands. *Don't worry. You can do this!*

Tina and Ellie began constructing another spell with much greater speed and precision than they had shown in their last one. Their first Blizzard Wolf had been defeated and was disintegrating into ice and snow, but at almost the same moment, their second emerged.

There was another clash in the center of the arena. The inner wall had already frozen solid, and parts of it were even beginning to crumble. A clash between supreme spells was a sight to behold.

While the girls' wolf wasn't immediately overpowered this time, it was still at a disadvantage. They might be able to win if they deployed multiple wolves at once, but...they seemed to have their hands full controlling and maintaining one.

Tina and Ellie let out strained groans.

"What's wrong?!" the masked man bellowed. "Is this the best you can do?! I'll commend you for casting a supreme spell, albeit a sloppy one. Well done! But it will take more than that to beat me! Give up!"

*I bet he's grinning like a madman behind that mask...*

The Four Great Dukedoms had always received special treatment in the kingdom due to their history, but their maintenance of military might in the form of supreme magic was also an extremely important factor. Even so, every house's magic had been gradually weakening in recent years, and the ducal houses were surely struggling to pass on their spells. A number of the Leinsters had mastered supreme magic, at least to some extent, but they were the exception. I suspected that the House of Howard, whose supreme spell remained only in the hands of its leader, was now the norm.

The girls' spell was being slowly but steadily driven back. If this kept up, they would be overcome. Just in case, I continued my preparations to intervene. I had studied a great number of ice spells in the past three months and even created some of my own, so I was confident that I could manage, even though I had never seen this one before.

*Still, it's a real shame... Now that they've come so far, I'd like for them to win, but...this difference is insurmountable. This is my fault for not being a good enough teacher. I might have been able to help them put up a better fight if only I'd had another six—or even three—months* *with them.*

"Sir! Don't look so gloomy! Don't you know? 'Always save the best for last.'"

Tina let go of my hand, untied her snow-white hair ribbon, and confidently wrapped it around her rod. No sooner had she done so than the rod began to pulse and shine. The spell control formula I had slipped into it earlier by way of a good-luck charm was deploying.

"What?!" I exclaimed in shock. "Y-You noticed that, Tina?"

"Wow," Ellie marveled. "It's so pretty..."

Tina grasped my hand again and whispered in my ear, "It was in the stories mother told me about the Lady of Ice. She always used to say that and tie her ribbon around her staff when she really meant business. I thought it would at least be worth a try, but...it looks like things are going to work out."

I was stunned. *The Lady of Ice? D-Does she mean the one...who was supposed to have mastered Frigid Crane?*

Tina and Ellie's Blizzard Wolf was suddenly gaining force and starting to turn the tables on its opponent. As it did so, all that remained of the inner wall was reduced to ice and snow, and the corridor and outer walls began to freeze as well.

*Oh no. If this keeps up, the whole building will come down.*

The man in the silver mask let out a loud roar as he poured mana into his spell, apparently intent on settling things. The girls tightened their grips on my hands as they put everything they had into controlling and maintaining their spell. They had rallied once, but now they were slowly being driven back.

Just when I thought my moment had arrived, I heard the voice.

"USE MY POWER. THE KEY IS IN YOUR HANDS."

It was the same voice I had heard before, and this time, it seemed that Tina had heard it too—there was a startled look on her face as she asked me, "S-Sir, what was...?"

"I'm not sure either, but...I don't think it means harm. If it's asking for you to use it, then you might as well try."

"R-Right!"

"L-Lady Tina!" Ellie interjected with urgency in her voice. "I-I'm at my limit!"

The girls' Blizzard Wolf had finally succumbed, and their opponent's was charging straight toward us.

"Ellie, get behind me!" I ordered.

"Y-Yessir!"

"Tina. I hate to say this, but it would be against the rules for me to help you."

"Don't worry, sir! As long as you're with me, I've got absolutely nothing to fear!" Tina declared. Then, she held out her rod in front of her and whispered, "Please, give me strength."

The jeweled tip of her rod flickered with light and powerful mana swirled around it. A spell formula I had never seen before was rapidly deploying of its own accord.

*Is Tina not in control of this...?*

Then, *it* materialized in front of us, spread its tiny wings, and took flight—leaving nothing but whiteness in its wake.

My memories of what happened next were hazy—the shock had been too great. The masked man's startled cry, the jolt as Tina hugged my right arm, and Ellie's warmth on my left as dozens of military ice-resistant barriers enclosed the training ground. The building itself was frozen and crumbling around us. But as I shielded the girls from the ferocious blizzard that was blotting out my view, I was certain I heard *its* wordless cry:

A song of lamentation.

*

That evening, when it was all over, I knocked on the heavy door of the duke's study. "Enter," his voice commanded.

"Excuse me."

Inside, I found Duke Walter sitting in an armchair and sipping a glass of wine. He was covered in bandages, and Anko, who really did seem to get everywhere, was on his lap.

"How are you feeling?" I asked.

"Oh, these are just scratches. I only bothered bandaging them because Graham insisted. Now, Allen..."

"Yes?"

The duke set his wineglass on a table and bowed deeply to me. "I cannot possibly thank you enough for helping those girls to grow so much. It seems that, once again, you have carved out a future for the House of Howard."

"Are you referring to the supreme spell?"

"Yes, I am. As I've told you before, of all those in my extended family, I am the only master of Blizzard Wolf. There was little hope for my eldest daughter, and until recently, Tina was... You understand. But now that she has learned the spell, a weight has been lifted off my family's minds. That final ice spell she cast was magnificent as well; even I don't know of anything like it."

"Her Highness deserves the credit. I'm sorry about your training ground, and I'll tell you about that final spell later, but first...might I ask you to continue the story that you left incomplete the other day?"

It wasn't in the duke's nature to be jealous of his daughter's progress; in fact, much to the contrary, he was brimming with unadulterated joy. So why had he so vehemently opposed her going to the royal capital?

"Very well. But please, don't breathe a word of this to anyone else—not even to Tina."

"I understand."

"My wife, Rosa, was a talented sorceress. We met at the Royal Academy and were drawn to each other at once. It wasn't long after that we married and were blessed with two precious daughters. But one day—I believe it was while she was pregnant with Tina—she suddenly lost all of her magical ability. I frantically assembled renowned physicians from throughout the kingdom." The duke took a breath. "Of course, we never discovered the cause."

"But that's..."

*...Just like Tina.*

"It was a slow process, but Rosa soon began to waste away. I wept when she safely gave birth to Tina. She was practically bedridden for a year afterward."

It took me a moment to process that, and only when I had regained myself did I pose the question on my mind. "Was she ill...?"

"No. Her doctors insisted that there was nothing wrong with her physically."

"What do you mean?"

At first, Duke Walter said nothing. It was clear that something was tormenting him, but eventually—and with much reluctance—he began to speak.

"I believe that Rosa was assassinated, most likely with a curse. I continue my investigation even to this day, but I still have no idea who did it or why. It may have been due to the magical research she was conducting, although nothing I found among her effects seemed worth killing for."

The duke fell silent for a moment before he continued. "I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw Tina cast a spell; she was the spitting image of her mother. The way she held her rod, the way she wove her spells, the way she courageously tried her best and refused to give up—they were identical in every way! After hearing this much, I'm sure you realize why I wanted to keep her here with me. I was frightened. Frightened that Rosa's fate might befall our daughter as well. But I was also well aware that that greenhouse was no longer big enough for my growing young sapling. That being the case, it's my duty as her father to send her out into a new world and watch over her—I'm certain that's what Rosa wants as well."

*

*Dear Lydia,*

*I'm writing to you as promised. See? I'm a man of my word.*

*We're about to leave for the royal capital. It makes me a little lonely to think that I'll be saying goodbye to this land of ice and snow, although I still don't handle the cold well. I would never admit this to anyone but you, but I think I was feeling a bit hopeless three months ago. Becoming a court sorcerer had been my goal for years, and...I had just a little faith in my ability to achieve it.*

*Still, I'm lucky to have gotten to tutor these girls. Teaching is fun, and it also takes courage—just like when I tutored you. These girls helped me to remember those feelings, and I'm grateful to them for it.*

*The professor (or to be precise, Anko, who is sitting on my shoulder as I write this) told me that you took first place in the court sorcerer exam and that you'll be graduating from the Royal University at the head of our class. Congratulations!*

*That said, I can't approve of your declaration that you're going to boycott the graduation ceremony. I'm not sure what to do about the sobbing teachers begging for my help with it either. I had no idea what was happening when I received four letters by griffin in one day.*

*It's only natural that I won't be attending—failing the court sorcerer exam despite being expected to graduate the university second in our class is an unprecedented disgrace, after all. But you're different. You should attend with your head held high. Isn't that how Her Highness, Lady Lydia Leinster, "the Lady of the Sword," ought to act?*

*Also, about what I wrote in my last letter... I've decided to cancel my trip home for now. Of course, I don't intend to continue as these girls' private tutor either; they deserve better than me. For the moment, my plan is to speak with the professor and see whether he has any jobs available. You don't have to worry about me.*

*Let me reiterate: go to the Royal University graduation ceremony. Everyone might start a riot if you don't. Well then, see you in the capital.*

*Yours truly,*

*Allen*

*(An honor student turned delinquent private tutor.)*

*

The cityscape visible from the station platform was still blanketed in white, and the train before me was likewise spotted with accumulated snow. It would supposedly be another month or more before spring arrived in the north and even longer before people packed away their coats and winter clothing.

Three months previously, I had disembarked at this station alone. Now, I was alone again—Anko, who was perched on my shoulder, notwithstanding—as I waited for the train to finish its preparations for its journey to the royal capital. A lot had happened, but I thought that my days had been well spent. At the very least, the part of me that had secretly been a little hurt over failing the court sorcerer exam was gone. I was grateful for that. Once I got back, I would have to explain things properly to my parents and my younger sister, to whom I had only given a brief outline of—

"Sir!"

"Allen, sir."

Tina and Ellie raced over to me, bundled up in warm-looking coats and scarves. Oh, Tina was wearing my scarf; I still needed to ask her to return that. The sight gave me a feeling of déjà vu—I couldn't count how many times I had seen it now.

"Thank you for waiting, sir."

Tina was the first to arrive.

"I h-hope we didn't keep you lo— Eek!"

She was followed shortly by Ellie, who lost her footing as usual and would have fallen over had I not caught her.

"Whoa there," I said. "Be careful—the road is still frozen in places."

"Y-Yessir. Th-Thank you very much..."

"You're quite welcome."

I gave the happy-looking maid a pat on the head and felt a sudden biting cold on my cheek.

"Sir, Ellie?" Tina suggested a moment later. "Don't you think it's time you separated?"

"You heard her," I told the maid.

"I-I don't want to," Ellie objected. "In fact, would you, um...hug me tighter?"

"Ellie!" Tina exclaimed.

"It's not fair, Lady Tina," Ellie replied after a sullen pause. "You got to sit on Mr. Allen's lap the whole journey here."

"Th-That was just because the car was cramped," Tina protested. "I had no choice but to—"

"There was room in the back seat."

Tina groaned, at a loss for a counterargument; Ellie had recently learned to speak her mind, even to her mistress. I certainly approved of the trend. That said, it wouldn't do for the two of them to quarrel here, so I stepped away from the maid.

"You two, are the others here yet?" I asked.

"They'll be a little— Oh, there they are."

I turned to see Duke Walter, traces of frostbite still visible on his cheeks; Mr. Walker, who was carrying the luggage; and Mrs. Walker, who was directing several maids. Even outside, the women were still in their uniforms. Weren't they cold?

"Hello there, Allen," the duke greeted me. "Thank you for waiting."

"Please, don't mention it. I wouldn't have had time to buy souvenirs otherwise."

"Is that so? I'm glad to hear it. I hate to ask, but would you look after Tina for me? I'll come along on a later train."

"Ellie, be sure to listen to Mr. Allen," Mr. Walker instructed his granddaughter. "Did you remember to pack medicine? If you run out of spending money, just—"

"Dear, I'll be going with them," Mrs. Walker chided her husband. It was a rare occurrence, to say the least.

Yes, both girls had passed the duke's final exam with flying colors.

What followed had been rapid. It appeared that arrangements for personnel had been made well in advance—Mrs. Walker and several maids would be permanently stationed in the royal capital during and after the girls' entrance exams. Tina's older sister apparently lived in the Royal Academy's dormitory, but that was unusual for a member of a ducal house; Tina and Ellie would instead be commuting from the Howard mansion in the capital once they enrolled. Of course, that meant they would need a staff to manage it for them. Duke Walter and Mr. Walker had wanted to go to the royal capital themselves, or so I'd heard, but Mrs. Walker's martial prowess—*ahem,* persuasive arguments—had convinced them to give up on the idea. I thought it was a good solution—I could hardly become a butler, after all.

A steam whistle screeched.

"Well then, I'll be waiting for you in the royal capital," I said, bobbing my head to the two men.

"Good."

"Please take good care of my granddaughter, Mr. Allen."

"I will. Please expect good news."

As I exchanged firm handshakes with Duke Walter and Mr. Walker, two thoughts ran through my mind: *Both of my hands hurt. Also, you're getting a little too close for comfort...*

"Allen," the duke said. "I trust you—I do—but if you think you can lay a hand on my darling little girl just because I'm in the north, then..."

"Mr. Allen," Mr. Walker added. "I know that you would never dream of such a thing, but...if, by any chance, you dare lay a hand on my dear Ellie while I'm not around, then..."

I forced a laugh; they were so overprotective.

*You have nothing to worry about, I assure you—Tina and Ellie are still only children. Once they're in the Royal Academy, they'll meet any number of nice, handsome boys. I think your time would be better spent worrying about* them.

As soon as the handshakes were over, soft little hands seized mine. "Tina? Ellie?" I asked. "What's gotten into you?"

"I was just thinking that I'd like to hold hands all the way to the royal capital."

"Um, well... So would I. I-Is that all right?"

"Of course."

In an instant, I could feel the cold, intimidating eyes of two parents lock onto me. But how could I shake off the girls when they were looking at me so hopefully? Truly, what was I to do...?

"But Duke Walter and Mr. Walker disapprove, so..."

The two men's eyes widened.

"Father."

"Grandpa."

They both groaned and hung their heads.

*You just can't beat them, can you? I know the feeling...* I thought. A moment later, the steam whistle blew a second time. *We'd better get on board. Oh, speaking of which...*

"Duke Walter."

"Yes?" The duke took a moment to respond.

"It's about that diary." I spoke in a deliberately low voice; I could hardly let Tina or Ellie overhear. "Are you certain you don't mind leaving it in my care? I have no doubt that it's a valuable document. Also, may I show it to others I can trust?"

"I don't mind," the duke whispered in response. "I'm not much of a reader, and there will be even fewer booklovers around with Tina and Ellie gone, so it ought to go to someone who needs it. Oh, and... Tell me if you learn anything about the great spells."

That gave me one less cause for worry, although the road ahead wasn't going to be an easy one by any means.

"Thank you very much. And yes, I'll be sure to."

"I am deeply in your debt. Now, you ought to be going."

"Indeed. Tina, Ellie."

"Right, father. I'm leaving," Tina told the duke. "Take care of my plants for me."

"I know," her father replied. "Don't worry; I'll be joining you in the royal capital soon."

"I-I'm going now, grandpa," Ellie said to Mr. Walker.

"Calm down," the head butler reassured her. "Contact me at once if you have any trouble."

I found the scene pleasant...and just a little envy-inspiring.

"It's time, everyone," Mrs. Walker urged us. "Please get on board."

*Oh dear.* I made a slight bow, took the girls' hands, and then boarded the train. Mrs. Walker and the maids followed close behind us. We were riding in a deluxe car this time—one that was even more extravagant than first class. I'd never imagined that train cars this luxurious even existed.

The steam whistle blew for a third time, and after the sound of closing doors, the train slowly began to move. I opened the window by my seat and shouted:

"Duke Walter, Mr. Walker, thank you!"

"I'll be waiting for you in the capital, father!" Tina added.

"Grandpa!" Ellie chimed in. "I'll come home as much as I can over the long vacations!"

I couldn't hear the men's voices anymore, but they kept watching and waving to us until they vanished from sight.

*

"Are you warm enough, sir?" Tina asked from the seat beside me.

"I'm fine, thank you."

She laughed bashfully. "This is all thanks to you, sir."

Ellie seemed frustrated, but I opted to pretend not to notice. *Anko, you don't have to curl up on my lap. There are seats available for — Oh, you'd rather stay here? Very well.*

We were in the middle of a little review—controlling the temperature inside our train car. Following her final exam, Tina had managed to learn to cast elementary spells of elements other than ice. I suspected that the final spell she'd cast had something to do with that. No one who experienced her temperature control would believe that she hadn't been able to cast a single spell just two months ago.

"Well done, my lady," Mrs. Walker praised Tina.

"That was incredible," Ellie chimed in, "but I think you ought to have allowed me to do it."

"You got a compliment from our teacher this morning. It's my turn," Tina countered.

"B-But you got compliments from Mr. Allen yesterday *and* the day before that, Lady Tina! It's my turn today!"

"Let's discuss this later, among ourselves," Tina suggested after a brief pause.

"Th-That suits me just fine!"

For better or worse, Tina had stopped holding back—at least when I was involved. I had investigated and considered a variety of theories, but the only thing I had been able to discover about her loss of control was that it had its origins in the excessive self-restraint she had been practicing. Therefore, after her final exam, I had told her that she "need not practice restraint or keep anything bottled up where I was concerned." Of course, I would need to do something to rectify her too frequent demands for hugs. It seemed that Lydia was already entertaining bizarre suspicions about me, and besides, she was—

Tina prodded me with her finger. "Sir."

I quizzically turned to look at her.

"What did you pick out as a souvenir for Lady Lydia?" she asked.

"Oh. I decided on this little guy."

"Wow! That's so cute!" she exclaimed. "But won't she be upset?"

"Why would she be?" I answered. "Lydia generally adores cute things. In fact, she'd incinerate me if I told her I'd decided against buying it."

"I-Incinerate?"

"A-Allen, sir, what do you mean?"

"Precisely what I said," I explained. "When something displeases her, she's quick to slice it up or incinerate it, and... Well, she's quite a handful."

Lydia was probably ready and waiting for me in the capital. I could picture the scene, and given the sequence of events thus far...she was likely more furious than ever before. In all honesty, I wanted to flee, but she would pursue me anywhere I went, even to the ends of the earth.

"Should the opportunity present itself, I'll arrange for you to meet her in the capital," I said. "Please prepare yourselves."

"I-I'll be fine," Tina declared. "I'll defeat her!"

"I-I'll do my best!" Ellie added.

*I hope they don't add fuel to the fire... And I can see you laughing, Mrs. Walker. Please desist; this is a matter of life and death for me.*

*

It was early morning at the Howard Mansion in the royal capital, where I had been staying for the past several days.

I was getting ready in my room when there came the pitter-patter of quick footsteps, which grew steadily louder until, out of nowhere, Tina burst through the door. She was wearing a blue and white dress decorated with fine embroidery, and in her hair was the snow-white ribbon she had worn on the day I'd first met her, and again on the day of her final exam. Clutched in her right hand was Rosa's rod, although that was to be expected, given that she was going to be competing that day.

Tina stopped in front of me and spun around once with a look on her face that was an equal mix of unease and anticipation. "Sir! Sir! How do I look? I don't look strange, do I?" she asked.

"You look fine, Tina. As usual, you're..."

"I'm...?"

"Amusing."

"You're supposed to say 'pretty'! Jeez!"

We shared a laugh; I was glad to see that she had grown so much more cheerful. Although she had been full of energy three months prior, she had also been putting on a bold front. Just when I was about to compliment her, however, another girl rushed into the room. She was dressed not in her usual maid uniform but in an ordinary long skirt. It was a fresh sight, to be sure. Now that I thought about it, I had never gotten the opportunity to see her in anything but her work clothes during my stay at the mansion.

"L-Lady Tina! You were the one who was so insistent on us waiting our turns!" she shouted. A beat later, she stammered in a lower voice, "A-Allen, sir, do I... Um, I mean..."

"What have we here? I see you aren't wearing your uniform today, Ellie," I remarked. "You look very..."

"V-Very what?"

"Charming. That outfit really suits you."

Ellie babbled in embarrassment. "Th-Thank you bery— Eek!"

"Whoa there."

I seized Ellie by the hand and pulled her behind me as dancing ice crystals filled the room.

"Sir," Tina said, "only complimenting Ellie isn't fair. In fact, it's *wrong*. Compliment me too."

She was preparing to unleash a Blizzard Wolf at any moment. I shrugged and lightly wrapped my arms around Ellie, bringing a look of consternation to Tina's face.

"Uh, um, well..." Ellie began to stammer, flustered.

"Sir! Ellie! Separate. At. Once!" Tina demanded.

"Oh? Don't you want to join us, Tina?" I asked, causing her eyes to widen in surprise. "I believe there's room for one more, but...I suppose you're not interested. What a shame."

"Meanie," Tina muttered after a disgruntled silence. She then hurried into my arms, albeit with a reproachful glare.

"Listen to me—you're going to be fine," I encouraged the girls. "You have nothing to worry about. Just have faith in yourselves and you'll get results."

"I understand, sir," Tina answered. "I believe in you, and you taught me, so I believe in myself too."

"Y-Yessir!" Ellie added. "I'm not very good at having faith in myself yet, but I do have faith in you, Allen, sir."

"Best of luck," I told them both. "Mrs. Walker."

"Yes, sir?"

I released the girls into the care of the Howards' head maid, who had entered the room unannounced. "Please take good care of them."

"Won't you accompany us, Mr. Allen?" Mrs. Walker asked.

I took a breath before answering. "I can't, else I might start sobbing that it's still too soon. I've also promised to drop in at a friend's house, so the rest is in your hands."

"I understand, sir," Mrs. Walker replied sympathetically after taking a breath herself. "May fortune favor you."

"Thank you very much."

Mrs. Walker was right—I would need all the luck I could get. Now, as for my students...

"Sir."

"Allen, sir."

The girls began separately before stating in unison: "Infidelity is wrong!"

What were they talking about? Lydia and I weren't in that kind of relationship. Then again...there were some unusual circumstances between us.

*

The first sight that met my eyes after one of the Leinster maids ushered me into the magnificent inner courtyard, replete with early spring flowers in full bloom...was a terrible flaming bird bearing down on me, its massive wings outspread.

*Oh dear. If that hits me, I quite honestly might die.*

I quickly negated the spell; after all, this was her usual greeting.

“Whatever your reasons, I can’t approve of a Firebird the instant we meet,” I grumbled to the beautiful girl, who was sitting in a luxurious chair and resting her chin on one hand as she sipped her tea. There was a small pocket watch resting on the table before her. “As I mentioned in my letter, I’m heartbroken, even though I may not show it, so I wish you’d offer me at least a little sympathy. I even arrived on time.”

“It’s your duty to be seated before I am—that’s just common sense. Besides, I don’t want to hear that from someone who can negate my Firebird so easily. Let yourself get incinerated next time so I can have some fun for once. There’s no way my magic would work on you anyway, and you could stop it ahead of time if you really tried. The next time you spout nonsense like that, I’ll slice you up without an ounce of restraint.”

“I’d rather you didn’t. I don’t stand a chance of beating you at swordplay, in this life or any other.”

“You should have started with that,” the girl declared after a brief pause.

This obviously disgruntled young lady was Lydia Leinster, the eldest daughter of the Ducal House of Leinster, the overlords of the south, and the albatross around my neck for the past four years. In other words, she, like Tina, was the daughter of a duke. She was also one of the finest swordswomen in the kingdom, an achievement that had earned her the moniker, “the Lady of the Sword.”

Interactions with Lydia demanded caution—the mere thought of calling her "Your Highness" would see me dropped into deciding between being sliced up by her uncompromising sword strokes or being scorched by her instantaneous Firebird. In that case, there was a very real risk that I wouldn't live to see the next sunrise. I did occasionally use her title to tease her, though.

Lydia normally preferred clothing that was easier to move in, but on this occasion, she was unusually dressed-up. I couldn't stop my heart from racing when I looked straight at her—the scarlet dress that matched the shade of her gorgeous long hair and set off her flawless, fair skin became her too well for my eyes to bear. She was a mind-boggling beauty...at least until she opened her mouth. Indeed, it was a truth that had deceived countless victims. This beautiful rose concealed thorns that were all too sharp—sharp enough to run me through rather than prick my finger. But I was in the wrong on this occasion, so I would willingly accept the injury.

"I'm sorry," I apologized, scratching my cheek.

Lydia allowed my words to hang in the air for a moment. "And what are you sorry for?" she asked. "Spell it out."

"For going to the Howards and taking a tutoring job without consulting you."

"And...?"

"For not writing you many letters, not coming to see you until today, and...not telling you why I failed the court sorcerer exam."

Lydia gave a small, satisfied grunt and then held out her hands to me without rising from her seat. I was a little hesitant, but I supposed I had no choice. Not this time, at least. I set the bag containing her souvenir on the table and wrapped the young woman in a gentle embrace. She was as dainty as ever. It was hard to believe that she was one of the foremost swordswomen and sorceresses in the kingdom when—

*Hey, don't squeeze me so hard. It's really quite painful.*

"I was really lonely, you know?" Lydia murmured, burying her face in my chest.

"Sorry."

She waited a beat before she added, "Never go somewhere far away without telling me ever again. And if you do go somewhere, take me with you."

"I'll do my best to— Ow! That hurts! Don't dig your nails into me!"

"That was your cue to say, 'Yes, mistress. My humblest apologies. I'll never do it again.'"

"Since when are you my 'mistress'? But...I'm sorry."

"Dummy." That was her only response after another short pause.

I'll never reveal how much time passed before the charming young noblewoman released me. A familiar maid waited for her to calm down before serving us tea.

*What is that vaguely concerned gaze for...? Please don't mouth things to tease me. "I suppose I'm a third wheel here," my foot. I'm certain you're carrying a concealed video orb, and I fully intend to confiscate it later.*

The maid in question definitely had one—that, or she was getting one of her subordinates to film us. She lived for anything that might make her exclaim, "Oh, darling Lady Lydia, how wonderful you are!" Everyone in the Leinster household loved this young noblewoman; she seemed audacious at first glance, but there was something about her that demanded sympathy.

Lydia, who had so recently been in an extremity of displeasure, was now happily seated beside me on my chair, resting her head on my shoulder.

*Hey, don't dangle your legs like that.*

"So, what do you think?" she asked me.

"About what?"

"About the entrance exams, of course."

Yes, it was the day of the Royal Academy entrance exams. I had been so busy with Tina and Ellie's final preparations since my arrival in the royal capital that I'd had no time to visit Lydia. Naturally, I had kept her informed, but that hadn't spared me her fiery greeting. How many times would I have to tell her how fatal that would be to any normal person before she learned? I realized that she was only playing around, but if she were ever in earnest, there would be nothing the likes of me could do.

"I'm sorry to have to tell you this," I answered the grinning Lydia, "but Tina is going to take first place. Ellie is sure to place highly as well."

"Oh really?" Lydia responded. "It's rare to hear you sounding so confident. Don't forget about my little sister, whom I've spent the past three months training nonstop. First place might be a little much to hope for."

"You would normally think so, but..."

"But?"

"Tina is unquestionably a genius; your sister won't be a match for her. She cast something on par with an advanced spell the day after she learned to use magic, and I only know of two people who have done that."

"Hmm..." Lydia fell into thought. "Well, I suppose that's life."

"What's gotten into you?" I asked. "You wouldn't normally give in so easily."

Lydia really doted on her younger sister, and they were very close, so this was usually where she would lose her temper and snap at me. She hadn't even asked me how Tina had learned to use magic.

"I mean, my little sister's working with a handicap," Lydia explained. "Unlike your girl, she didn't have the benefit of three months with a certain somebody. Of course she's going to lose! Isn't that right?"

"Hang on. You wrote in your letter that you were better than— Wait. I'm sorry. A Firebird at *this* close range really is no laughing matter."

"A real man doesn't quibble about every little thing," Lydia noted. She then changed her tone and added, "Oh well. It's time, so let's get started. You can tell me *all* the details afterward."

I shot her a puzzled look. "What do you— Ah!"

*I knew it!*

I could sense numerous people surrounding us. I tried to make a break for it, but my right arm was held fast.

*T-Talk about an iron grip! Where in those slender arms is she hiding all that power?!*

Smiling maids emerged from their hiding places and sped over to us. They were holding full-length mirrors and what looked like dressing implements.

*Oh, I have a bad feeling about this...*

"The exams should be ending any moment now," Lydia remarked from beside me as she checked her pocket watch. She sounded as though she was enjoying this with all her heart. "My sister will be home soon, and what kind of brother-in-law would you be if you greeted her in such a shabby outfit?"

"Since when am I her brother-in— O-Ow! Y-You're going to break my arm! I can hear my bones creaking!"

"She's my sister. That makes her your sister-in-law," Lydia explained. "Isn't that just common sense?"

"Wh-What kind of 'sense' does that— A-All right! I said, all right! I told you just now, and I'll tell you again as many times as it takes: don't try to cast Firebird at such close range!" I paused for a beat and then gave in. "Fine. Do as you please."

"You should have said so in the first place. You're just so obstinate. Is everything ready?"

"Yes, my lady! All is prepared and in perfect order." The maid who had served us tea earlier—she was the head maid and served Lydia personally—beamed and curtsied. Where had she come from?

"Are you prepared, Mr. Allen?"

"I'm in your hands," I told her after a moment of silence.

"How commendable, sir. I would expect no less of you. Oh, how adorable my lady has been these past three months, Mr. Allen, and all thanks to you. Every day was simply heavenly. She waited for your letters on tenterhooks. When one failed to arrive, she would groan, 'Should I not have written that in my last letter?' or 'If he ends up hating me, then, then... Oh, what should I do?' And when she did receive one! Oh, you should have seen my lady huff and declare, 'I really don't care if he writes to me, you know? I mean it. Now, take this and mail it by the fastest griffin!' I assure you, the Leinster Maid Corps could soldier on all this year on that alone! And words cannot describe her loveliness when she received word that you would be calling on her today. Why, just to pick out that dress, she agonized and agonized and then finally called on every maid in the house to vote on—"

"How much time are you going to waste on this chitchat?" Lydia interjected, her attention focused on her talkative head maid. "I take it you won't mind working the rest of your life without pay?"

"...I beg your pardon, my lady."

My hair, clothes, and every other aspect of my appearance were subsequently arranged to perfection by the Leinster maids. *Um... Why do these clothes fit me perfectly?*

I was totally exhausted, both mentally and physically. Only a few things stuck in my memory. There was the dazzling smile on Lydia's face the moment I was dressed, when she'd hugged me so tightly that I'd thought my bones might break, and the cute round eyes of the snow-white souvenir wolf doll clutched in her hand. There was also the ring of maids that had been recording us and the shock when Lydia's sister had returned—accompanied by Tina and Ellie, for some reason—and the three had immediately leapt at me. Last of all, there was the way the trio had started frolicking in the inner courtyard following a trivial argument.

*I'm glad. There's no question that they all passed; after all, ordinary children at play don't fire off volleys of intermediate spells or clash with advanced spells, much less supreme ones. I wonder if the test site made it out unscathed...*

One week later, the Royal Academy announced that year's new admittees.

# Epilogue

"I'd heard so much from the professor, and I've been constantly surprised over the past three months, but I still never dreamed you'd produce such results!"

Those kind words came from Duke Walter himself. He had just arrived in the royal capital from the north and spoke familiarly from his seat opposite me. Beside him sat Tina, who was wearing a notably composed expression. Seeing her like that reminded me that she really was a beauty.

"Ti—*ahem*, Her Highness and Ellie were the outstanding ones," I told the duke. "Please, save your praise for them."

Duke Walter laughed. "If I took your advice, private tutors the world over would be out of a job."

"I couldn't have done it without you, sir," Tina chimed in. "And call me 'Tina' like you always do."

"Oh, I couldn't possibly..."

"You have my permission," Duke Walter solemnly declared, bringing a flush to his daughter's cheeks.

"V-Very well."

*This is going to make what I have to say even harder...*

"My little girl took first place in the Royal Academy entrance exams, and she nearly matched the highest ever grade, at that!" the duke declared. "Ellie placed highly as well. What can I call this accomplishment but 'remarkable'?! It's customary for the head of the incoming class to be asked to give an address at the Royal Academy entrance ceremony, and the only other member of my family to have earned that honor was my late wife Rosa. My little girl is a credit to our name! You've done a magnificent job."

Both girls had successfully earned their admissions to the Royal Academy. It appeared that, somehow or other, I had managed to complete my job.

So, Rosa had also taken first place on her entrance exams. Tina was fidgeting in apparent embarrassment at the compliment. I supposed this meant she was going to be representing the incoming class at the ceremony. The current students would presumably be represented by the student council president—that is, Tina's older sister, according to a letter I'd received from my sister just a few days prior. Was Duke Walter aware of that? I tried to read his expression but it gave nothing away.

Lydia's younger sister had apparently taken second place, likely by a narrow margin—she was extraordinarily gifted in her own right, after all. I hoped that she would become good friends with Tina and Ellie.

It went without saying that, after the exam, I had been taken aside and thoroughly bullied by the Leinster sisters. I was sick and tired of dressing up like a butler—it looked like nothing more than a pale imitation now that I had seen the type perfected in the form of Mr. Walker. I had suffered a grave mental wound.

*I'll never put on that outfit again!*

"You have my sincere gratitude," the duke continued. "And so, I'd like you to stay on as a private tutor. What do you say? I'll agree to any conditions you like and furnish you with anything that you require."

"Well..."

It was an extremely generous offer. My wages for the past three months alone might reasonably be called a staggering sum; there was going to be quite a bit left over even after I deducted my train fare and my sister's allowance. Even so...it wouldn't do for me to become actively involved any more than I already had been. It would only invite trouble, and for that reason, it was time I took my leave.

"I'm grateful—truly grateful—for your offer," I replied, "but I must respectfully decline."

Tina's eyes widened in shock. "Sir! Wh-Why? Why won't you stay...?"

"And why is that?" Duke Walter asked, echoing his daughter's question.

"You see—"

"Allen, have no fears about the royal family," the duke said, cutting me off right away. "I don't blame you for what happened at your court sorcerer exam. I suppose you intend to show the Leinsters the same consideration you're showing us?"

It took me a moment to process his remark.

"...So you know about that."

"Of course I do. I'm a duke, remember; important issues naturally reach my ears."

"Wh-What are you talking about?" Tina asked. "Did you take the court sorcerer exam, sir?"

*I'd really rather not discuss that here...*

"The court sorcerer exam is divided into a written test, a practical, and an interview," the duke continued. Not only was he indifferent to my troubles, he actually seemed to be enjoying himself. I'd never expected him to take an opportunity like this to pay me back for the events in his mansion, but in retrospect, I should have seen it coming. "Just between us, you had the top score on the written test and placed highly on the interview—which you would have secured top marks on as well if not for the envy of a group of examiners you gave a sound thrashing. Under normal circumstances, you would have passed. In the practical, however..."

The duke paused for effect.

"You had the lowest score of any applicant. That would be why you failed."

"Failed..." Tina repeated, taken aback. "That's impossible! If my teacher took last place on the practical, then no one alive could have passed it! Are the court sorcerer examiners a bunch of blockheads? How could they not see that?!"

Her tone reminded me of a blizzard, her gaze was furious, and cold emanated from her in response to her emotions. I was glad that she was willing to get angry on my behalf, but... I gently stroked her head, and her mana abruptly dispersed. At the same time, a loud cough came from the seat across from me.

*I beg your pardon.*

"As a general rule, participants in the practical exam conceal their faces in order to avoid intimidation," the duke explained, "but I'm told that your opponent—Second Prince Gerard—broke with custom by deliberately introducing himself and provoking you before the start of your test. I also hear that his insults extended to your family and to young Lydia."

"Duke Walter, please leave it at that," I protested.

"I want to know," Tina insisted. She was staring at me, an intense seriousness in her eyes. I was out of luck—there was no stopping this.

*And I haven't even told Lydia yet...*

"You didn't do anything when the prince insulted you," Duke

Walter continued, “but once your practical began, you did negate all of his spells, steal his mana, and then proceed to overpower him in swordsmanship. After the exam, the prince made a fuss about that, claiming that you ‘lacked proper respect.’ Naturally, his claims were unfounded, but...they did come from the second in line to the throne, and that made them impossible to dismiss. In the end, the examiners opted not to grade your practical at all.”

“I have no regrets,” I said.

“Even though it meant sacrificing a future as a court sorcerer? I’m told that that’s been your goal since you enrolled in the Royal Academy. Of course, I’m sure that was partly for your parents’ sake, and for Lydia’s once you were at the academy.”

*If he knows that much, there’s no point trying to hide the rest. I’ll tell him everything...although I might end up letting Tina and Ellie down.*

“I’m an orphan,” I explained. “I’m not related to my parents by blood, and I don’t know who my biological parents were. Nevertheless, my parents and my younger sister love me, and even Lydia...is kind enough to show me some concern. I’m not mature enough to laugh off insults directed at them. At the same time, I don’t want to cause trouble for those who have been generous to me as a result of this incident.”

I no longer had any regrets about the post of court sorcerer itself. Even if turning back time were an option, I would do the same thing again—after all, my life until now had been too good to be true. Still...not being able to meet Lydia or these girls openly anymore would make me lonely to say the least.

Duke Walter sighed. “If your mind is already made up, then there’s nothing I can say. But I want you to remember: you have a friend in the Howards. If you ever change your mind, don’t hesitate to tell us so. We will assist you.”

“Thank you very much,” I replied. “As for the other matter, I intend to continue looking into it with all due diligence.”

A moment of silence followed, broken only when Tina leapt to her feet and shouted, “I-I won’t accept this! I absolutely refuse to! Having to say goodbye when I’ve just finally made it to the Royal Academy is... It’s just...!”

With that, she raced out of the room, a shower of ice crystals fluttering around her as she went. I’d hurt her feelings...

No sooner had Tina fled the room than a familiar man with the air of a scholar entered with a familiar in the form of a black cat on his shoulder. "What rascal brought little Tina to tears?" he demanded to know. "Making young ladies cry is a serious offense."

"What are you doing here, Professor?" I asked after a moment of stunned silence.

"Oh, Walter and I are inseparable. Now, enough about me, young man—go after her."

That explanation didn't entirely satisfy me, but I made a slight bow and exited the room.

*What was that smile for, Professor...? And why is Duke Walter looking so grim?*

Just before I closed the door, I caught a snippet of the professor's cheerful conversation: "Sorry I kept you. I've spoken with His Majesty—off the record, of course—and..."

*

According to a maid I encountered in the hallway, Tina had apparently gone out into the courtyard. It was nearly springtime, but nights in the royal capital were still rather chilly, and Tina was quite lightly dressed. I hoped that she would be warm enough outside.

I followed the directions the maid had given me and found Tina standing in the courtyard with my scarf—which she had still not returned—wrapped around her neck.

*Thank goodness. It would have been a disaster if she'd run out of the mansion.*

"Tina," I called to her.

The girl gave a start and turned to look me straight in the eye. After a moment, she asked, "Are you really going to quit? No matter what?" She didn't beat around the bush—a trait that reminded me just a little of Lydia.

I slowly walked forward and stopped just in front of her. "I won't hole up in my hometown—a certain someone will kill me if I do. Instead, I plan to find a job here in the capital."

"That doesn't answer my question..."

"Both of you will be fine without me now."

"No! No, we won't..." Tina let her words trail off and then continued, "I-I mean, now we know that..."

"Know what?" I asked, but she didn't answer.

*I really must be no good to have made such a nice girl cry*, I thought as I gently rubbed her head. Then, I crouched down to meet her gaze and said, “Regardless of whether I quit, I’ll always be your teacher.”

“Really?” she asked after a moment. “Do you really, really mean it?”

“I do. If you’re ever in trouble, I’ll come running.”

Tina fell silent before she spoke again. “I’ll return this, then. Since this is goodbye, let me help you put it on.”

She took off my scarf and wrapped it around my neck...but she kept a grip on the ends and refused to let go. She had been hanging her head the whole time. Was she crying? I was just about to say something to her when I was yanked forward without warning and —

The next thing I knew, her lips had touched mine.

I was shocked beyond words. It was the innocent kiss of a child—just a momentary brush—but it was enough to convey her intense feelings. Glittering ice crystals were fluttering around us. Time froze, my thoughts were in disarray...and as our lips parted, I wondered how long we had been standing there for.

Not only Tina's cheeks, but her ears and even her neck were flushed bright red. She was looking at me with tears welling in her eyes. My own cheeks were probably flushed as well. I was at a loss; this was unfamiliar territory to me, but still, I had to say something.

Just as I was about to steel my resolve and speak, however, I heard footsteps from behind me.

"I saw that. Didn't you, Walter?"

"...I did."

I turned around. There stood the professor, who looked as though he was having the time of his life, and Duke Walter, who wore a more conflicted expression.

*Don't tell me that... I see. In that case...*

"...You set me up, didn't you?" I asked accusingly.

"Whatever do you mean?" the professor replied. "I was merely consulted about 'the most effective way to keep you from leaving.' It seems that young Tina and Ellie have become quite close with Anko. Friendship truly is a beautiful thing. Oh, that reminds me—a certain student of mine, who consistently undervalues himself, has been worrying about a little incident. It's been resolved. Did you think the Leinsters, who consider you Lydia's minder, and the Howards, who are well-known for their strong sense of duty, would sit by and do nothing? How naive—as naive as a newborn kitten. That's a bad habit of yours—you're especially harsh on yourself and soft on others. And attend the Royal University graduation ceremony, will you? I doubt Lydia will put in an appearance if you don't. That aside, young man, I assume you would never do anything so deplorable as abandoning a beautiful maiden who's just given you a kiss?"

I could feel a genuine urge to murder the professor sprout within me. "D-Damn you, you rotten old..." I growled.

No wonder Lydia had been so lax with her questioning—it had all been a setup! One that might have even dated back to that first day when I'd boarded the train, based on what I'd heard.

*Very well. If that's the way you want it, I have some ideas of my own.* I began deploying spells, determined to settle my years of pent-up grudges...when I felt a tug on my sleeve.

"Sir," Tina said, gazing up at me uneasily, "you told me that I don't have to show any restraint or keep anything bottled up, remember?"

*Well, I suppose I've got no choice now... I did say that, and I'm a man of my word.*

I roughly tousled Tina's hair and gave her a kiss on the forehead. Then, I dropped to one knee, bowed my head before the startled girl, and said, "Your Highness, Lady Tina Howard, would you be so kind as to grant me the opportunity to teach you once again?"

"Huh?"

"You won't grant my request? In that case, may I ask Miss Ellie Walker, who is hiding just over there?"

A girl dressed in a maid uniform sprang out from behind a tree, raced to my side with astonishing speed, and then hugged my left arm. "I-I'd love to, if you wouldn't mind!" she exclaimed. "Allen, sir, I'd like o-o-one of those too! It's n-not fair that only Lady Tina got one!"

"Y-You can't, Ellie!" Tina shouted back. She then shifted her attention back to me and said, "Granted. Now, don't ever leave without my permission again, all right? And when you do go somewhere, I'll accompany you. I'll go with you anywhere!"

I had a feeling that another girl had told me the same thing not long ago.

And that was how my naive self, having been easily ensnared, ended up staying on as the private tutor to a duke's daughter. Life is full of surprises.

I would end up writhing in shame a few days later when I discovered that Lydia also knew the truth about the court sorcerer exam.

*

"By the way, why *did* you put so much faith in me from the very beginning? I know you'd heard of me from the professor and Lydia, but I don't think that would normally be enough to explain it."

"Huh? W-Well, you see... Please bend down, sir."

"Is this far enough?"

"I'll whisper it in your ear, although I forbid you to laugh. The way the professor and Lydia talked about you made you sound like a prince out of one of the fairy tales mother used to read me. So...I'd pictured you and looked up to you for a very long time. But when I actually met you, sir, you were many times kinder and more handsome and amazing and wonderful than I'd imagined... That's why."

"Umm... Thank you?"

"Why did that sound like a question?! You should be delighted! Jeez!"

"I look forward to our future lessons together, Your Highness, Lady Tina."

"You're so mean, sir! ...And I look forward to our lessons forever."

# Afterword

Nice to meet you, everyone. I'm Riku Nanano.

This novel was based—with significant revisions—on my winning entry into the isekai fantasy category of the third Kakuyomu Web Novel Contest, held by the web novel site Kakuyomu. I hope that new readers (of course) and those who have been supporting me since the web version alike will find something to enjoy. This is my debut novel, which means this is my first ever afterword, and...I'm already stumped. I still have pages left to fill.

Hmm. In that case, why don't I share a scene that took place while I was writing this volume?

This was back when the illustrations for this book were completed. I could barely contain my excitement—it was hard to believe that something I'd written was going to be published, and with illustrations, at that!

First, I looked at Tina, the female lead. *Ah... She's adorable. Yes, she's meant to still have a childish air about her. There's nothing for me to complain about—it's perfect.*

Satisfied, I turned my attention to Ellie. *Ah... She's precious. And you can tell that she's older than Tina. I have no complaints about her either. More perfection. Now, time to get back to work writing that—*

*There's still another file. Whoops. I almost forgot about the main character.*

*Oh...*

Without a word, I stood up, boiled some water, brewed myself some coffee, and then took a sip to calm myself. I gathered all my courage and took another look. It appeared that I hadn't been dreaming.

*A-Allen! W-Were you always that handsome?! Huh? Really? I had my suspicions—just look at how Tina and Ellie react to you—but I can't help feeling a strange pang of defeat now that... Ahem.*

The illustrations were perfect; I would never presume to request revisions. Allen is handsome, has a great personality, and is a first-rate sorcerer—what is there to be afraid of?

What’s that? He’s even more handsome than he was in the web novel? “You’re just imagining things,” I say, grinning from ear to ear.

That’s that taken care of. What a relief! Of course, Lydia was amazing too!

Finally, I’d like to thank all the people who helped me:

The members of the Kakuyomu Web Novel Contest selection committee. I never even dreamed that you would award my work first prize. Thank you so much. I’ll put everything I have into my writing.

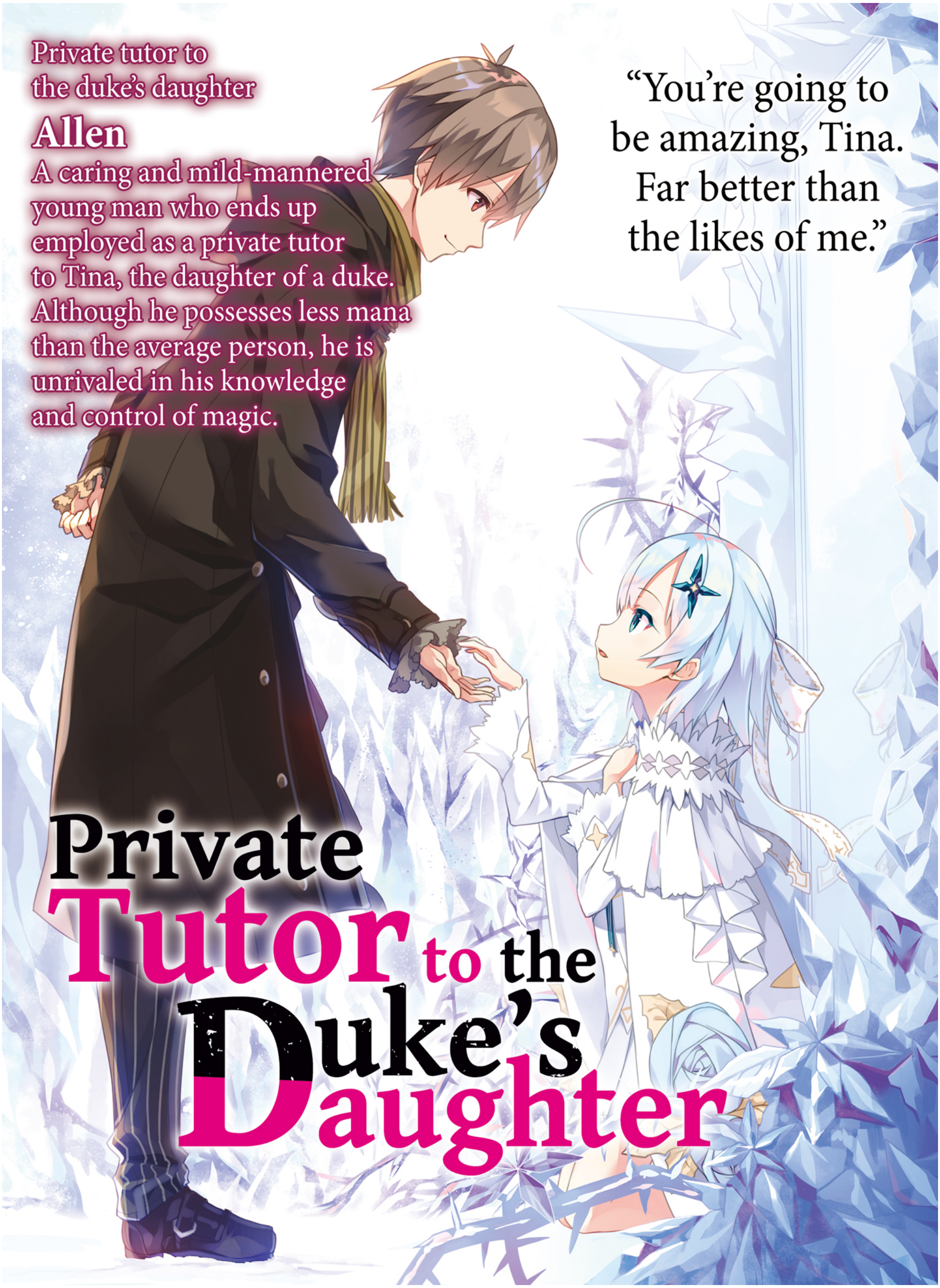
My editor. You really have always been an invaluable help to me. Somehow or other, we managed to get this book into shape, and I look forward to working with you again.

The illustrator, cura. Thank you for such wonderful pictures. I hope I can write a story that will live up to them.

Everyone who read the web novel. The work I began so casually has become a published book!

And all of you who have read this far. I can’t thank you enough, and I look forward to the day we get to meet again.

Riku Nanano

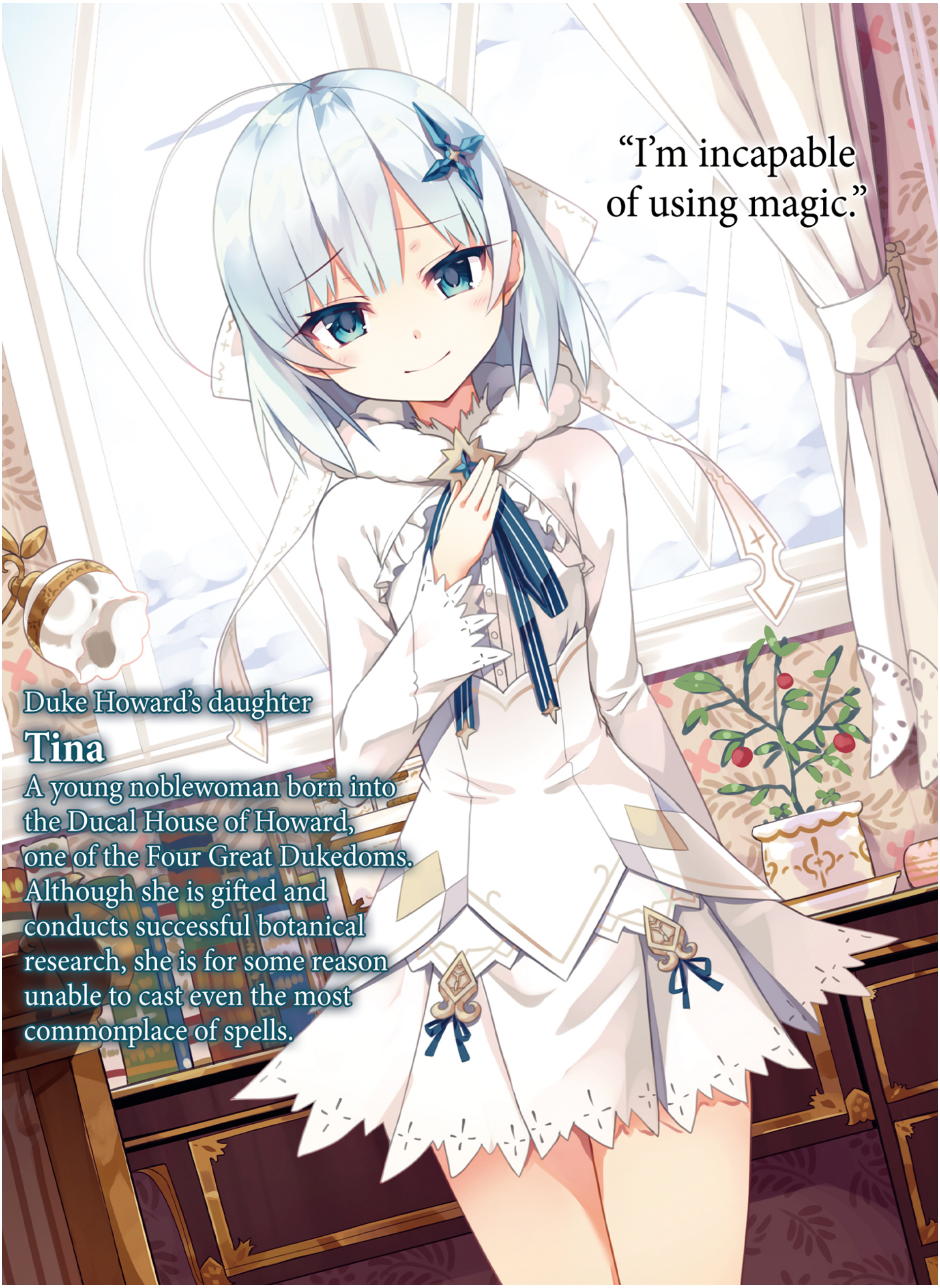

Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter

Private tutor to
the duke's daughter

**Allen**

A caring and mild-mannered young man who ends up employed as a private tutor to Tina, the daughter of a duke. Although he possesses less mana than the average person, he is unrivaled in his knowledge and control of magic.

"You're going to be amazing, Tina. Far better than the likes of me."


“I’m incapable of using magic.”
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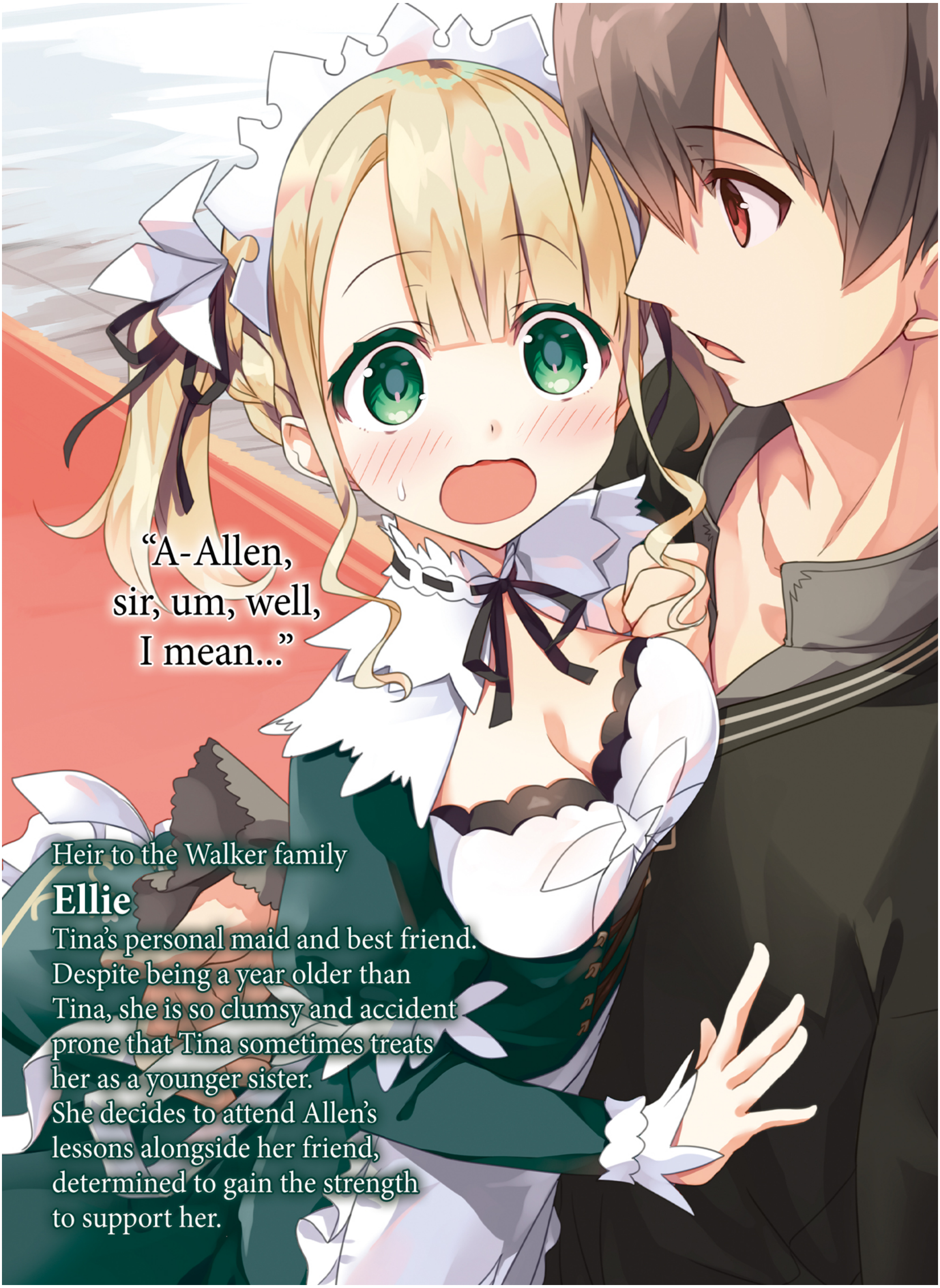

"A-Allen, sir, um, well, I mean..."

Heir to the Walker family

**Ellie**

Tina's personal maid and best friend. Despite being a year older than Tina, she is so clumsy and accident prone that Tina sometimes treats her as a younger sister. She decides to attend Allen's lessons alongside her friend, determined to gain the strength to support her.

"Our teacher told me I look adorable in—I-I mean, I like it because it's easy to move around in!"
"Lady Tina, you've been really fond of that outfit lately. It looks lovely on you!"

Two charming students share a bit of girl talk while out of their tutor's sight.

"Lady Tina and I won't lose. After all, we're Mr. Allen's students!"
"Don't you know? 'Always save the best for last.'"
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Private Tutor to the
Duke's Daughter

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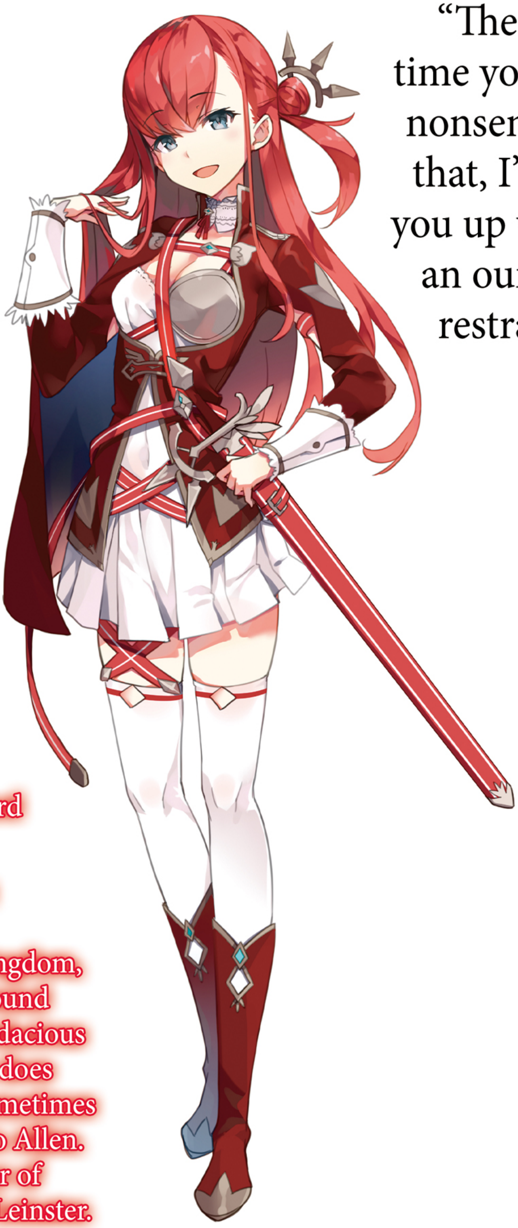
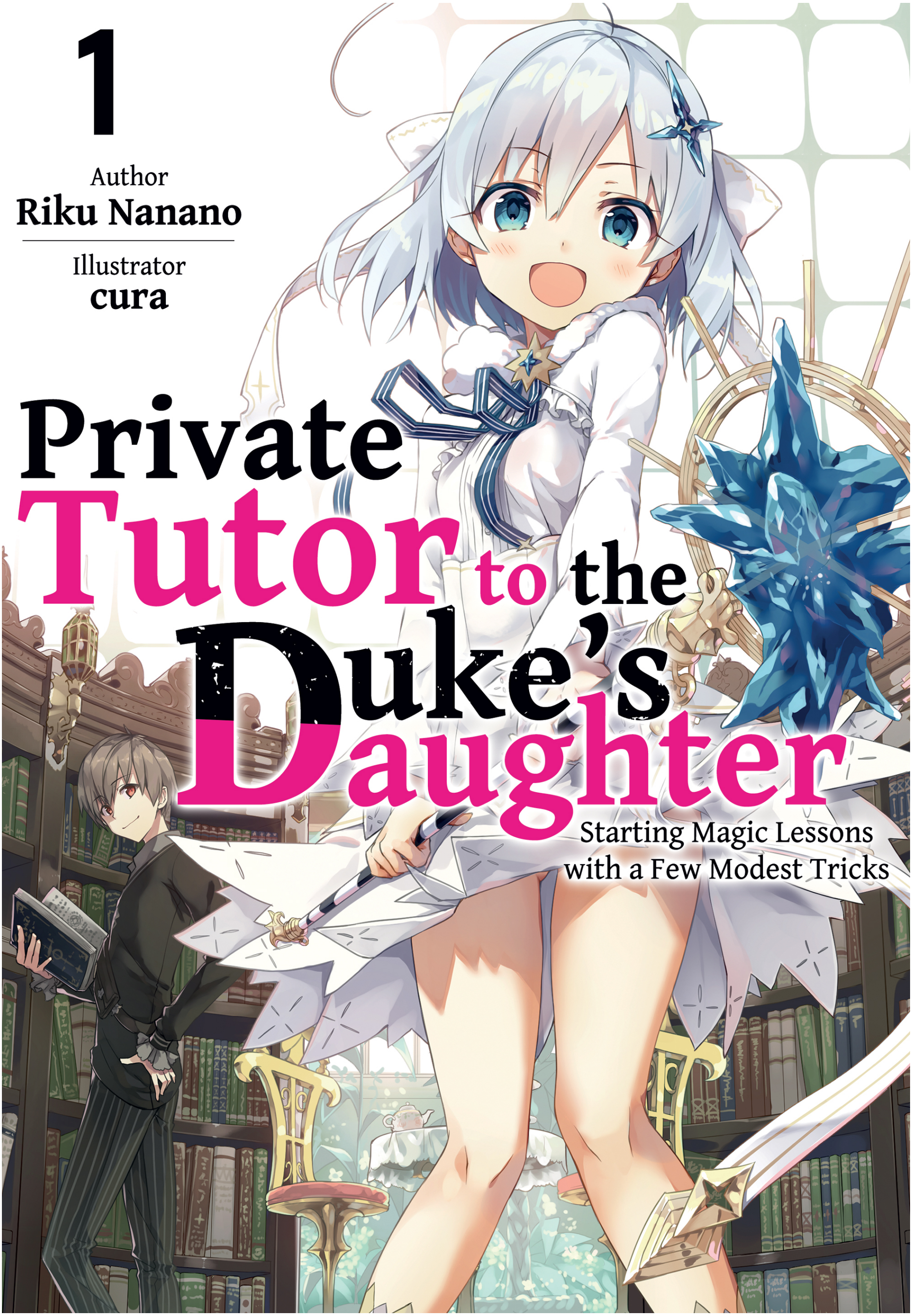


"The next time you spout nonsense like that, I'll slice you up without an ounce of restraint."

The Lady of the Sword

**Lydia**

One of the foremost swordswomen and sorceresses in the kingdom, and the albatross around Allen's neck. This audacious young noblewoman does as she pleases but sometimes shows a softer side to Allen. She is also a daughter of the Ducal House of Leinster.



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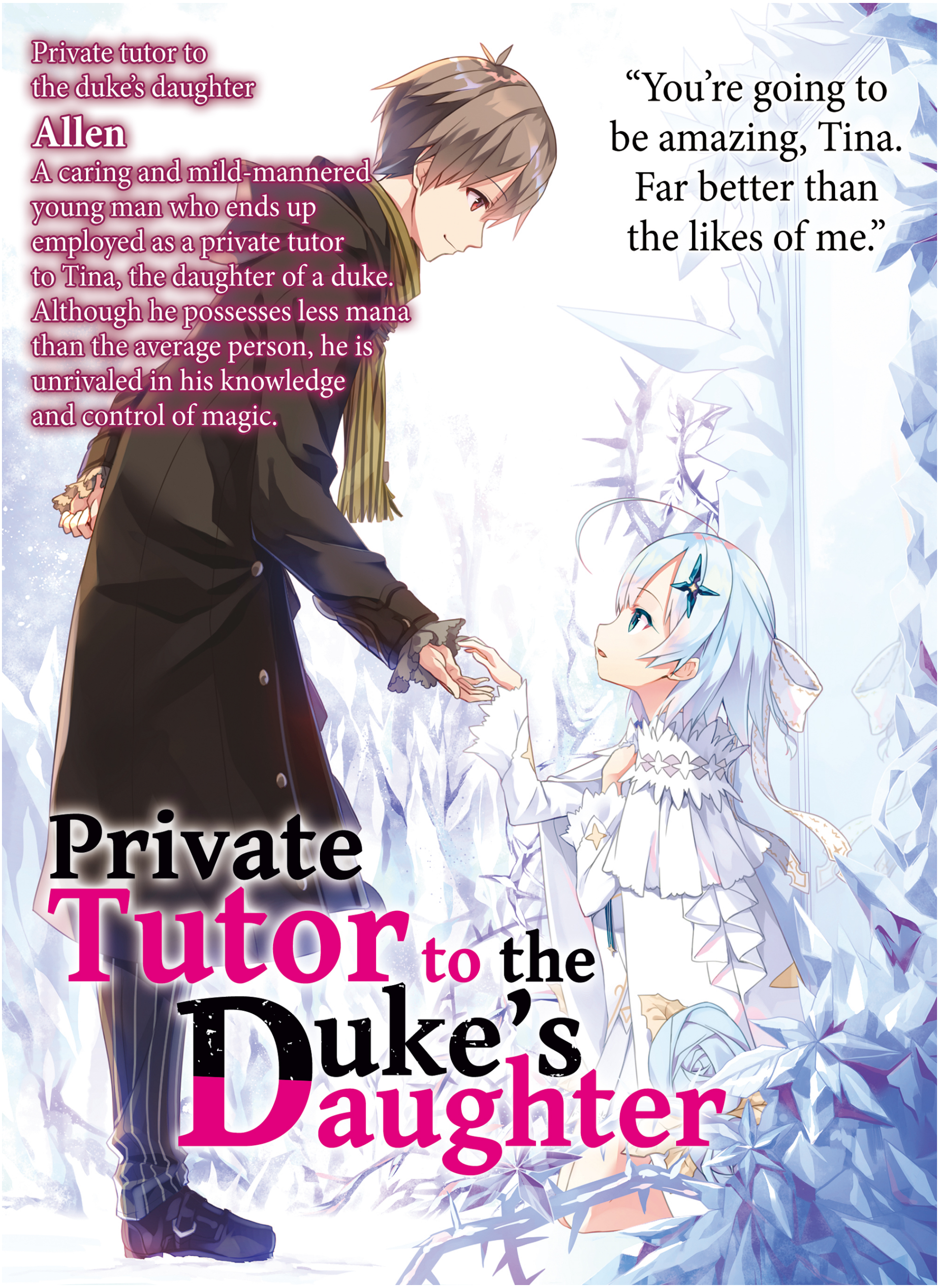
Author
**Riku Nanano**

Illustrator
**cura**

# Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter

## Starting Magic Lessons with a Few Modest Tricks



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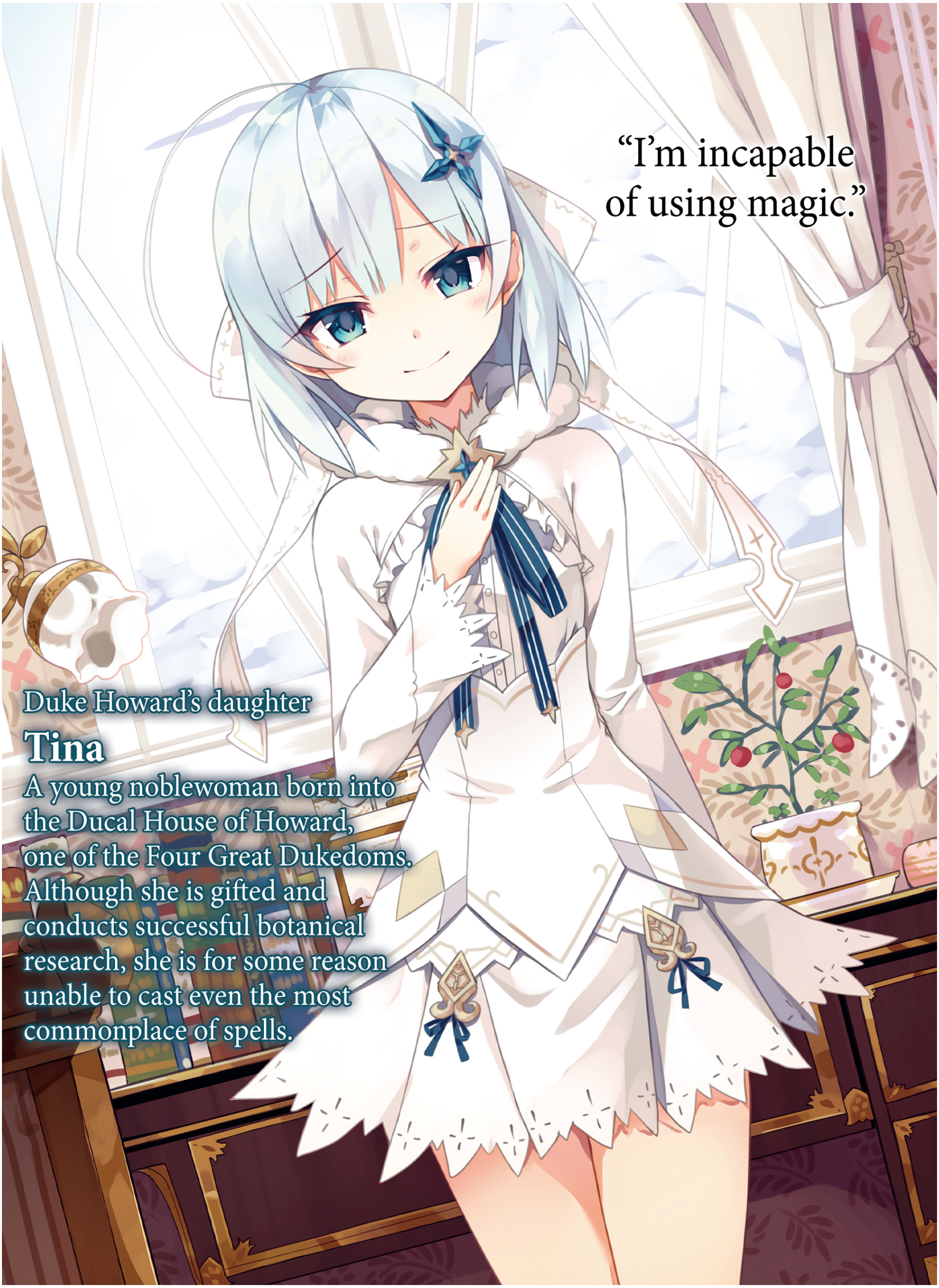

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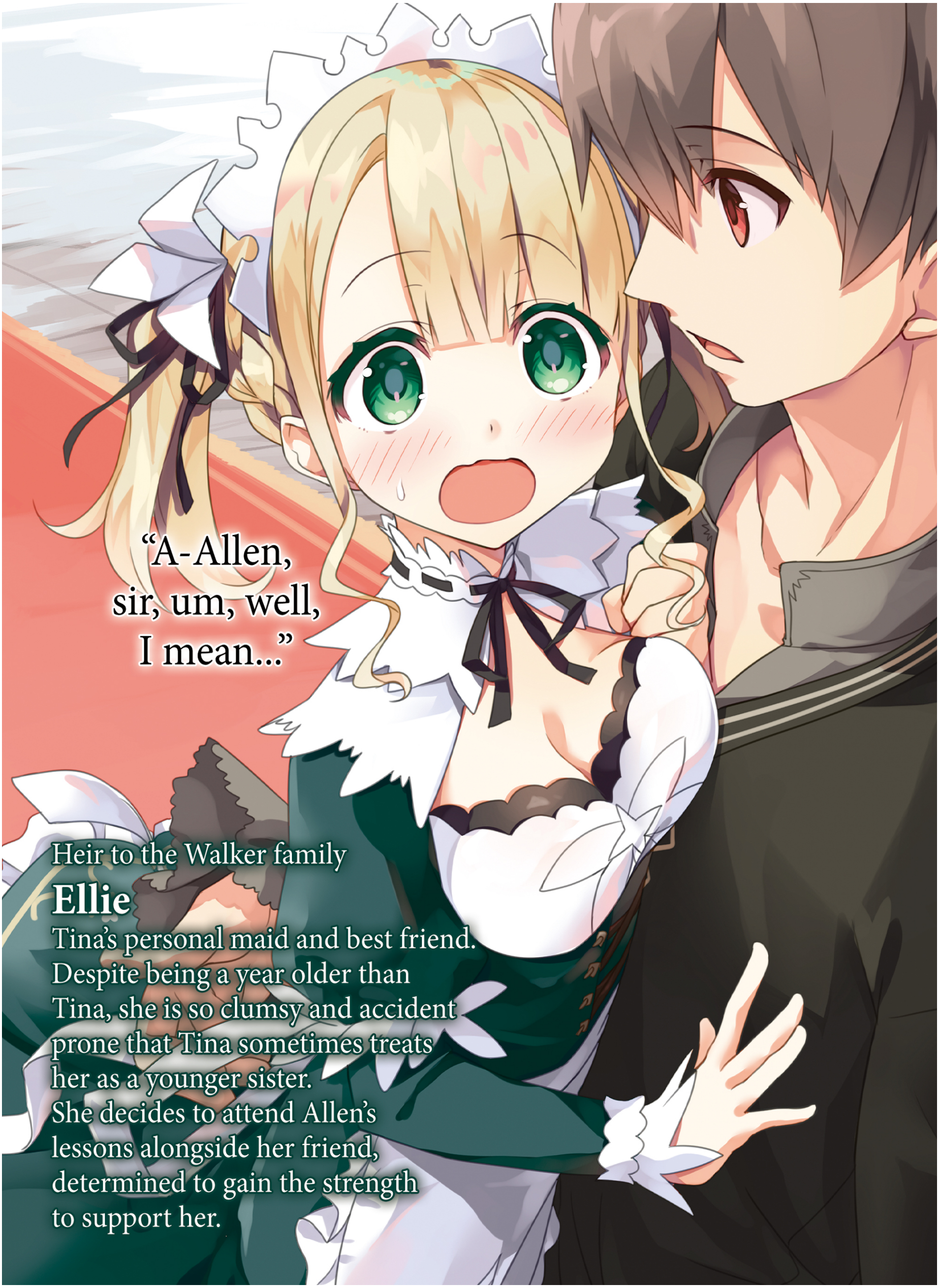
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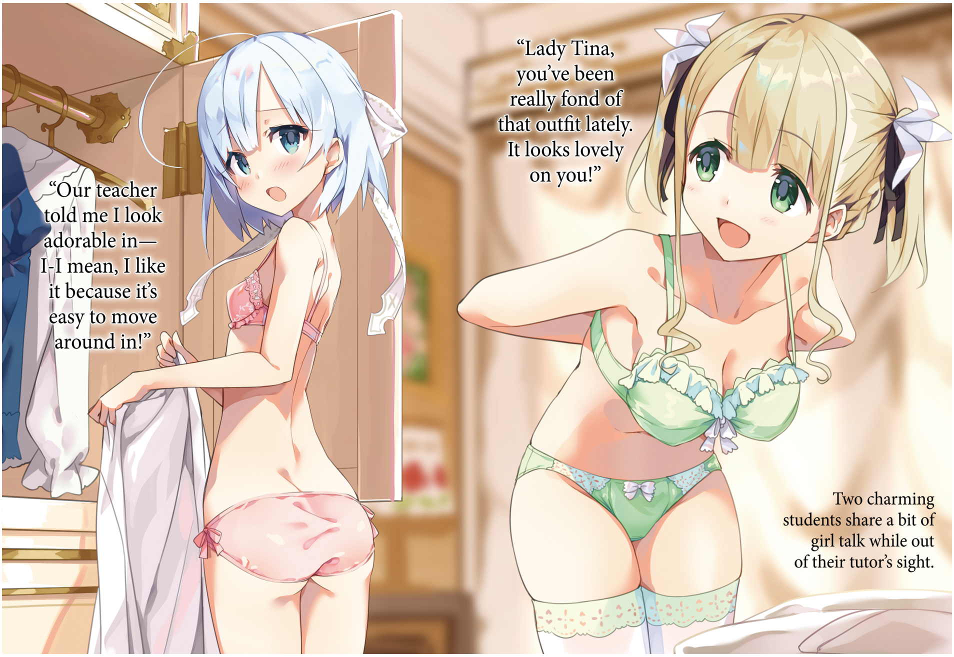
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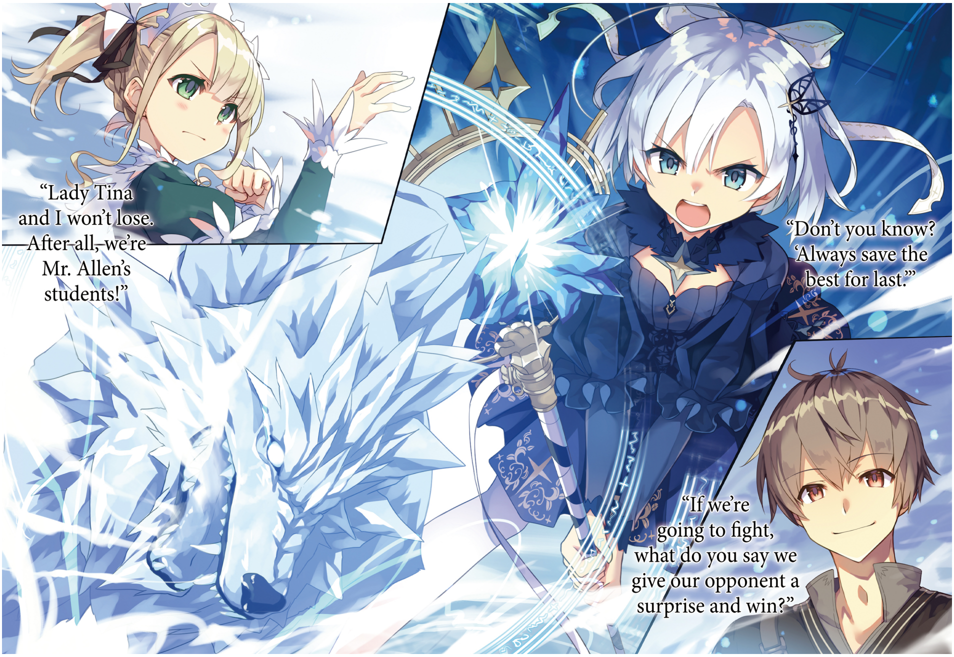
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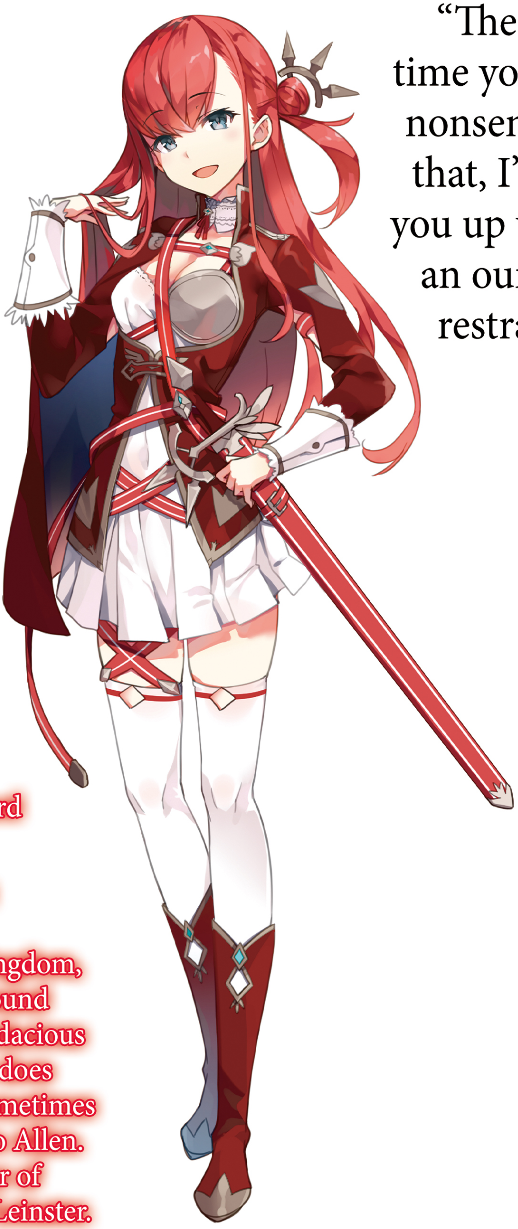

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Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter: Volume 1
by Riku Nanano

Translated by William Varteresian
Edited by Kieran Redgewell

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